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The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

Course Guidebook

Professor Leo Damrosch
Harvard University



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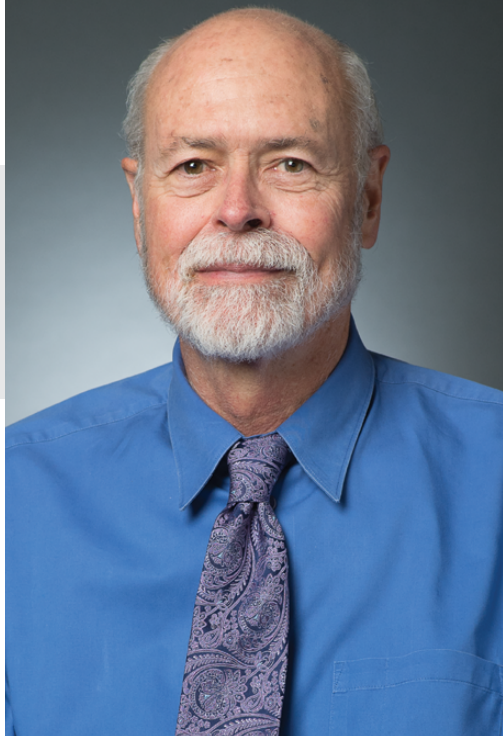
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Professor Damrosch has published in numerous academic publications. His most recent books are *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*, a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction and winner of the PEN New England Award for nonfiction; *Tocqueville's Discovery of America*; *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in biography, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography, and a finalist for the Kirkus Prize in nonfiction; and *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism.

Professor Damrosch's courses have focused on British and French literature and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries, covering a wide range of topics and writers. They have included National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars for college teachers.

Professor Damrosch has been awarded a Harvard College Professorship for distinguished teaching and has served as chair of Harvard's Department of English. In 2007, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Professor Damrosch's other Great Course is *The Enlightenment Invention of the Modern Self*. ■

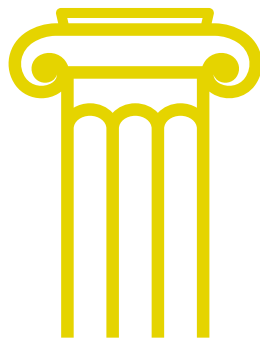


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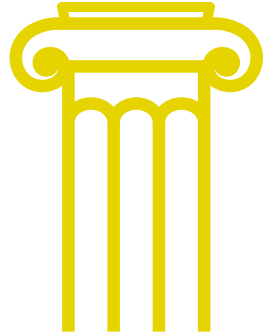
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Books That Matter: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

This course offers an in-depth encounter with a great masterpiece, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It has been planned to be helpful as an introduction, but also as a companion for those who would like to read it concurrently with the *Decline and Fall* itself.

Throughout the course, you will be thinking about the *Decline and Fall* from two points of view: as a masterpiece of literature and as a lasting contribution to history. Most histories written in Gibbon's time, or even much later, are of interest today only for their literary qualities; we look to more recent historians to explain what happened in the past. Naturally, some of Gibbon's interpretations have been questioned or supplemented, and new modes of historiography have explored topics that he doesn't address. But the story he tells is still the best narrative in existence of more than 1,000 years of memorable personalities and events that did much to shape the world we still live in. A distinguished classical historian recently wrote, "Gibbon's achievement remains undiminished to this day."

Gibbon begins with what he regards as a golden age in the 2nd century A.D., when a vast territory from the Atlantic to the Middle East was ruled by the emperors known as the Antonines. Already, however, forces were in place (Gibbon calls them a “hidden poison”) that would undermine the stability of the Empire: rule by a single individual, which could all too easily be abused, and the excessive power enjoyed by a huge army that was needed to defend far-flung borders.

Even a brief summary will indicate the epic scope of what follows: the rise of Christianity, with reflections on its secular significance that caused something of a scandal in Gibbon’s day; the conversion of Constantine and his founding of the new city of Constantinople in the East; the fascinating attempt to restore paganism by the emperor known as Julian the Apostate; the evolution of Christian doctrine, which was hammered out in a series of major councils that Gibbon describes in impressive depth; the development of monasticism; the threat to the Empire by successive waves of barbarians—Huns, Vandals, Goths—who gradually settled down and became assimilated; the end of the Western Roman Empire, which then began to evolve into the nations of modern Europe; the continuing survival of the Eastern Roman Empire, known as Byzantium; the rise of Islam, with enormous consequences for the Mediterranean world; the development of western feudalism; the Crusades, in which Europeans tried to win back the Holy Land; new assaults by Ottoman Turks and by barbarians led by Genghis Khan and Tamerlane; and finally, the fall of Constantinople in 1453, with which the great narrative ends.

Throughout, the course will bring in criticisms and insights from modern historians in order to see the *Decline and Fall* from the perspective of the best specialists today. The concluding lecture will be a retrospective view of the entire book in modern perspective. You will also get to know Gibbon the man in a biographical account in the second lecture, and afterward by noticing the many places in his book where his personal experiences and values help to shape his story.



The Greatness of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*

Edward Gibbon, one of the most gifted historians of all time, gave his entire life to creating a single masterpiece: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Its theme is the breakup of the longest-lasting empire the Western world has ever known, an empire that to this day pervades political, legal, intellectual, and religious discussion. In this lecture, you will consider the impact and longevity of Gibbon's history, which continues to influence politicians, artists, historians, and readers the world over.

Profound Inspiration

- At the age of 27, Edward Gibbon was making what was known as the Grand Tour of Europe, as young English gentlemen often did. He already knew France and Switzerland, but what he longed to experience was Italy—and not just Italy, but Rome, the great city that once ruled the Western world and was still the headquarters of the mighty Catholic Church. Indeed, in the 18th century, Rome was no longer the capital of anything but the Church.

Modern unified Italy had not yet been born, and the Italian Peninsula was still a mosaic of independent states.



- As Gibbon tells us in his *Memoirs*, there was a specific moment when all of a sudden, he discovered his life's work. These are his words:

It was at Rome, on 15 October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.

- “The decline and fall of the city” was Gibbon’s first thought, and it would have been ambitious enough by itself. Before long, though—as he immersed himself in research—the subject kept on growing. In the end, it would embrace the whole vast empire that was governed from Rome, starting in the days when it still seemed masterful and secure.

- When the Roman Empire fell to pieces in the 5th century A.D., the focus would shift to its successor, the Byzantine Empire, which would last for another 1,000 years. The story would only end when Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, fell to the Turks in the year 1453. By that time, medieval Europe was on the brink of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.
- The first volume of the *Decline and Fall* came out in 1776, 12 years after Gibbon's original moment of inspiration in Rome. There were two more volumes in 1781 and three final volumes in 1788.
- Gibbon put everything he had into this single work. It was a huge gamble. His health wasn't always good, so he couldn't be sure he would even live to finish the job. But when he did finish it, he knew it had been the right choice.
- The very heart of Gibbon's message is contained in that sentence about his moment of revelation, back in 1764. Most of the great buildings of ancient Rome were long gone by the 18th century, cannibalized over the years for building stones. Those that did survive, such as the grand Colosseum, were semi-ruins. The one ancient structure that remained unchanged was the Pantheon, which is still awe-inspiring to this day, and that was because it had been repurposed as a Catholic church.
- The way the Empire was replaced by the Church is exactly what Gibbon was thinking about as he listened to the barefooted friars singing their evening service. And all around Gibbon lay the ruins of the Capitol, once the nerve center of an incredible empire that stretched from Gibraltar to the Middle East and from cold, remote Britain to the then-fertile regions of North Africa.
- When Gibbon's sixth and last volume was in print, the *Decline and Fall* contained 1.5 million words and approximately 8,000 footnotes. It has been estimated that about 10,000 individuals appear at least briefly in the *Decline and Fall*, and hundreds of them have more than walk-on parts.



The Pantheon

Lasting Importance

- For those of us living in modern times, two questions have to be answered: First, why read a history that was written 250 years ago when so much important research has been accomplished since then? And second, why choose a book as enormous and detailed as this one instead of a brief, up-to-date history by one of our contemporaries?
- The answer to the first question is that a great work of history is not just a collection of information; it brings a unifying, insight-inspiring perspective to the past. Later historians have brought other perspectives of their own that we are grateful for, but the experts confirm that the *Decline and Fall* remains profoundly truthful as the story of what actually happened—truthful in its broad sweep and in its amazingly rich details.

- The answer to the second question is that Gibbon is a masterful storyteller. Once you settle down with his book, you get hooked, just as you do with a great novel. An admiring modern historian has said, “Reading Gibbon is addictive.” Another leading historian, Glen Bowersock, has said that in his own work, “The *Decline and Fall* has provided a standard of interpretation and exposition that remains as extraordinary today as when it was written.”
- In the *Decline and Fall*, all we have to go on are fragments of evidence from long ago. Some of the evidence is ambiguous and hard to make any sense of. Gibbon tells us frankly whenever that’s the case. Even when the evidence seems powerful and convincing, we still have to think about who was writing it down back then and what their personal agendas might have been. As Gibbon reminds us, much of what we know about some characters in history comes from enemies who hated them and misrepresented them.
- Because we can never know the whole truth, Gibbon’s project is very much like a novelist’s. He doesn’t just narrate what happens—he teaches us to construct the narrative with him as we go along. It’s an extraordinary achievement: not just telling a story, but educating us in how to interpret the story.
- There were other highly successful histories in Gibbon’s day, by Voltaire and David Hume, for example. Nobody reads them anymore for their historical content—their bias and their blind spots are too obvious. And later on, the *History of England* by Thomas Babington Macaulay was regarded as a titanic achievement, right through the 19th century. Macaulay is still a good read, but nobody now trusts his interpretation of history. Gibbon has no rival in giving us magnificent literature that is also, in its own right, magnificent history.
- Gibbon and his readers all inhabited territory that was once part of the Roman Empire, and it had a special hold on their imaginations. Even the names of their cities preserve a direct connection with the Roman past. Marseilles, for example, used to be Massilia. There are countless ruins that are still visible above ground, often right in the



middle of towns and cities, as well as coins, funeral urns, and mosaics from Roman villas that still get turned up by farmers' plows.

- The overall theme of the *Decline and Fall* was especially compelling for British readers in Gibbon's time. Just as a small city on the Italian Peninsula came to rule a vast empire, a small island at the northwest corner of Europe was ruling an even vaster empire—on which, proverbially, the sun never set. What was the likelihood that the British Empire would suffer the same fate the Roman one did? In historical hindsight, it's a telling coincidence that Gibbon's first volume came out in the fateful year 1776.
- In the 19th century, when the British Empire had reached its apogee and Queen Victoria gloried in the title of Empress of India, parallels with Roman history were constantly invoked—not surprisingly, as most members of Parliament had been drilled in the Latin classics in school.
- Whenever empires have tottered, people have remembered Rome. The German philosopher Oswald Spengler, who published his famous book *The Decline of the West* in 1918, said explicitly: "Rome will always give us the key to understanding our own future."
- Winston Churchill, who presided reluctantly over the end of the British Empire, was a huge fan of Edward Gibbon. After a spotty education, Churchill began to read seriously in the 1890s when he was a young army officer stationed in India. The book he began with was the *Decline and Fall*.

Stylistic Accomplishments

- Gibbon's prose style is distinctive, and it has always been admired. It's important to realize just how fundamental that style is to his achievement. Style is not just an arbitrary choice of a manner of writing.

- It's important to recognize two things in particular about Gibbon's style. One is that it is very different from the relaxed, direct, conversational style that many people prefer today. The other thing is that it works extremely well in doing what it's intended to do.
- Gibbon's challenge was to condense a vast range of information and ideas into intelligible form. He does this by laying out his clauses, sentences, and paragraphs in a carefully structured way. You can't speed-read the *Decline and Fall*, because it constantly invites you to compare, contrast, and evaluate—sentence by sentence, page by page.
- In his *Memoirs*, Gibbon tells us how he put his building blocks together. "It has always been my practice," he says, "to cast a long paragraph in a single mould: to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory, but to suspend the action of the pen until I had given the last polish to my work."
- This kind of writing was known as periodic. When we use the word "period" today, we just mean the little dot at the end of a sentence. But in traditional rhetoric, it meant the whole interrelated structure of clauses that brings us to that conclusion. That is exactly what we find in the *Decline and Fall*.
- By bringing out parallels, or by setting antitheses against each other, Gibbon makes us think. The result is a coherent structure for what might otherwise have been bafflingly confused. The essayist Lytton Strachey, who was a great stylist himself, praised Gibbon for that. By means of Gibbon's style, Strachey says, "lucidity, balance, and precision are everywhere introduced, and the miracle of order is established over the chaos of a thousand years."

Suggested Reading

Burrow, *Gibbon*.

Porter, *Edward Gibbon*.

Questions to Consider

1. Can a work of nonfiction be a true classic in the same way that a great novel or epic poem is?
2. What tradeoffs are entailed in reading a good abridgment of the *Decline and Fall* instead of the complete work of over 3,000 pages?
3. In reading Gibbon, what is lost if, in the culture of our time, few people have the awareness of Roman civilization that he took for granted in his contemporaries?



The Making of Gibbon the Historian

In 1788, when the final volumes of the *Decline and Fall* were published, Gibbon began writing an account of his life. He had no intention of revealing his inner life. Instead, his goal was to trace the experiences and influences that shaped a historian. In this lecture, you will learn about Gibbon as a man, a historian, and a memoirist.

Childhood and Early Education

- Edward Gibbon was born in the London suburb of Putney in 1737. He grew up in Buriton, a little village in the county of Hampshire. His family had a comfortable brick manor house. They were well off, although his father's spendthrift ways would cause much unhappiness over the years.
- Edward didn't receive much affection from his parents. His father was well-meaning but self-centered and remote; his mother was constantly pregnant, ignored her son, and died after 10 years of marriage when Edward was nine years old. The boy's education was haphazard, alternating between uninspiring temporary tutors and occasional episodes in schools where he was bullied.
- Fortunately, there was one important adult in the boy's life. That was his mother's unmarried sister Catherine—Aunt Kitty, he called her. She would stay up all night by his bedside when he was ill. In addition to giving unstinting love, she nurtured Edward's precocious love of reading. He adored books of historical romance—books that introduced him at an early age to some of the memorable characters who would later appear in the *Decline and Fall*, including Richard the Lionheart and his noble Saracen opponent Saladin, Tamerlane the Magnificent, and Genghis Khan.
- When Gibbon was 15, his imagination was seized by a history of Rome that he happened upon. By the end of the next year, Gibbon wrote, he had “exhausted all that could be learned in English of the Arabs and Persians, the Tartars and Turks.” They too would figure largely in the *Decline and Fall*.

Gibbon in Lausanne

- There was an unexpected crisis, with crucial significance for the future historian, when Gibbon was enrolled at Oxford three weeks before his 15th birthday. That was a normal age in those days; there were no

real entrance requirements, much less competitive exams. Oxford was more like a finishing school than a university, with nothing much taught except Latin and Greek. History was not taught at all.

- The crisis came when, after Gibbon had been at Oxford for a single year, he converted to Roman Catholicism. As he described what happened long afterward, it was a purely intellectual decision based on a technical argument about the validity of miracles. More than likely, however, some underground priest had been talking to him. It was also, undoubtedly, an act of rebellion against his father.
- Catholicism was not illegal in England, but all the professions were closed to Catholics. Still worse, from his father's point of view, the family stood to be financially ruined, as anti-Catholic laws would prevent young Edward from inheriting the estate. His father lost no time shipping his rebellious son off to Lausanne, Switzerland, to board with a Protestant pastor and get over his folly.



- The culture shock in Lausanne was staggering. Gibbon's host and tutor, the kindly Reverend Daniel Pavillard, spoke no English, and young Gibbon didn't know any French. Fortunately, Gibbon had a gift for languages and rapidly became fluent. By the time he left Lausanne, he was thinking and writing more easily in French than in English. This would turn out to be invaluable for his later work; French was the international language of scholarship, and a vast amount of research had never been translated into English.
- More importantly, Gibbon's fluency in French connected him with the thinking of the continental Enlightenment, which most Englishmen regarded with distrust. Gibbon had his own disagreements with the French philosophes, but he was fully at home in their intellectual world, and his great history would have been impossible without that.
- Gibbon also perfected his Latin while he was in Lausanne. He read ancient texts with ease, and he had a poor opinion of the distortions that can be caused by translations. The Reverend Pavillard turned out to be an excellent tutor in a whole range of subjects, and he became genuinely fond of his guest. By patient reasoning, Pavillard managed to wean the youth from Catholicism. Gibbon's father was in no hurry to bring him home, however, and Gibbon remained in Lausanne for five long years.
- While in Lausanne, Gibbon fell in love for the only time in his life. Suzanne Curchod, the object of his affection, was the beautiful and brilliant daughter of a Swiss pastor. She found Gibbon attractively different from her usual admirers, and the two planned to get married. When Gibbon's father found out, however, he was appalled. He had no intention of letting his son marry a penniless foreigner instead of a well-to-do English girl. He threatened to cut Edward off without a penny and ordered him to come home at once.
- Back at Buriton, Edward pleaded his case earnestly, but in vain. As he put it tersely in his *Memoirs*, "I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son." This statement has often been derided as dispassionate. While



it's true that Gibbon was not an especially passionate person, he was certainly deeply affectionate. It's possible that his statement represents an effort to see himself objectively, trapped in a conflict between two important roles: the lover and the son. He wrote to Suzanne (in French, of course):

Mademoiselle, I cannot begin! However I must. I take up the pen, I drop it, I take it up again. You can tell from this beginning what I am going to say. Spare me the rest. Yes, Mademoiselle, I must renounce all thought of you forever.

- It's notable that Gibbon addressed Suzanne with the formal pronoun *vous* and not the intimate *tu*. Lovers speak that way in classical French literature.
- The real reason why Gibbon had been called home soon emerged. His 21st birthday was at hand, at which time he would be empowered to relinquish his legal right to inherit his father's large estate. Reluctantly,



he did so, and his father converted the estate to cash by means of a huge mortgage.

- It would be years before Gibbon could be confident of an adequate income to support his deeply-held ambition to write a great work of history. Nowadays, a really successful historian may be able to make a living entirely from royalties, and most historians have academic positions as well. Neither possibility was open to Gibbon. University fellowships paid badly—even if history had been taught there, which it wasn't. And because authors sold all rights of their manuscripts to a publisher up front, they received no further income, even if a book became a best seller.

Diverse Pursuits

- Gibbon's next few years were divided between two very different pursuits: One was intensive study of the classics and works of history, and Gibbon kept buying books whenever he could afford it. The other was as an officer in the county militia. This was just at the midpoint of the Seven Years War. Gibbon actually enjoyed himself, and the Hampshire militia never came close to fighting—indeed, they never left England.
- Gibbon's ideal way of life was what used to be called epicurean—not gross sensuality, but moderate, civilized enjoyment of life's pleasures. This philosophy of life implied a particular stance toward the modern world. There were plenty of moralists who claimed—just as moralists in ancient Rome used to—that the growth of “luxury” was destroying the integrity of the nation. Gibbon had no sympathy with that. Like his friend Adam Smith, he thought that commerce and the goods it produced were a blessing.
- On the issue of wealth and privilege, Gibbon felt no embarrassment at all. In chapter 9 of the *Decline and Fall*, he contrasts modern civilization with primitive “barbarism,” as he always calls it. Admittedly, he says, the great majority of people have to work hard for a living, but they

should not resent the privileged class that has a different role to play. When the French Revolution violently challenged those assumptions, Gibbon was absolutely horrified.

- Gibbon was forced to pay attention to practical matters at Buriton, because his future security depended on the solvency of the estate. After nearly incredible mismanagement by his father, the family's financial situation collapsed altogether in 1768, and Gibbon was given the thankless task of trying to repair the damage. When his father finally died two years later, he admitted he didn't feel much grief.
- The two years after that were devoted to selling off properties and restructuring debts. By 1772, Gibbon had restored order, and with quiet rejoicing he moved into a town house in London. He was at last free to do what he felt he had been born to do.

Gibbon in Politics

- A cousin of Gibbon's from Cornwall, at the extreme southwest of England, knew that Gibbon was eager to be in Parliament and was prepared to arrange it. There were so-called "safe seats" all over Britain that were controlled by individual magnates, and that's how Gibbon came to represent a Cornish borough that he never visited even once.
- Gibbon's political career began as a humiliating setback. He had hoped to make a name for himself by delivering eloquent speeches, but he was never able to get up the courage to even try. Still, the eight years Gibbon spent in Parliament were an invaluable political education. He came to regard politicians as inherently deceitful, an attitude that surfaces repeatedly in the *Decline and Fall*.
- Gibbon's politics were very much those of the class of landowning gentry. His philosophy was much like that of Madison and Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers*: They thought that direct self-rule by all citizens





would lead to trouble and instead should be exercised through elected representatives.

- Gibbon thought the balanced British constitution was the best political system that had ever been evolved—something the French philosophes, oppressed by an autocratic regime and religious censorship, could only yearn for. In the *Decline and Fall*, there are echoes of this political ideal when Gibbon describes the catastrophes that can ensue when a single individual holds absolute power, as the Roman emperors did.
- Gibbon consistently emphasized the drawbacks in trying to rule a huge empire from a single capital. It seemed to him that 18th-century Europe had developed an ideal balance among separate nations, as if it were a federation. And if any one nation seems to be growing too powerful—as France threatened to do—the others would band together to keep it in check.

Suggested Reading

De Beer, *Gibbon and His World*.

Low, *Edward Gibbon*.

Young, *Gibbon*.

Questions to Consider

1. How relevant is an author's life to his or her work? Is it really just a form of gossip, or does knowledge of this kind help us to appreciate the *Decline and Fall*?
2. The formal language in which Gibbon, in his *Memoirs*, describes ending his engagement with Suzanne Curchod has often been criticized as emotionless. Does that seem right—and whether or not it does, does it tell us anything important about the historian?
3. Could Gibbon's lifelong immersion in books be regarded as a kind of escapism, or was it—as he himself believed—evidence of a true vocation?



Temple of Castor
and Pollux in Roman
Forum, Italy



The Empire at Its Beginning

The first chapter of the *Decline and Fall* is a tour de force. Gibbon's goal in crafting the opening chapter was to introduce some of the principal themes of the work without appearing to lecture or pontificate. In this lecture, you will examine how the *Decline and Fall*'s first chapter keeps the reader engaged while setting the stage for the long march to follow.

Opening Lines

- The very first paragraph of Gibbon's first chapter is a little masterpiece in itself. He has chosen to launch his story in the 2nd century A.D., when the Roman Empire was at its apogee. Yet as repeated hints make clear, that happy situation was already doomed to collapse. Here's the very first sentence:

In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth—and the most civilized portion of mankind.

- By the time he wrote his final volumes, Gibbon might not have included that last part. By then, he knew how long the great Chinese civilization had already endured when the Romans came along. But he would still have made this implied contrast between the civilization that was centered in Rome and the “barbarian” threat that was lurking in the northern forests and on the steppes of Eurasia.
- At this stage, however, he goes on to say: “The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour.” A huge empire has very extensive frontiers, and they have to be defended. If the Romans’ will to fight were to weaken—as eventually it did—the barbarians would come pouring in.
- Contrariwise, the stronger the army remained, the more possible it was for the army to dominate any other entity in the Empire. It could easily make and break emperors. Before long, that’s exactly what it did.
- The provinces, Gibbon says, were united by “the gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners.” These will be absolutely central themes in the *Decline and Fall*. The Romans were gifted at law—and indeed, Roman law still had immense influence in the Europe of Gibbon’s day. As for “manners,” the Empire was held together not so much by authoritarian control as by shared values. So far so good; but trouble is brewing:

The peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence. The Roman Senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government.

- The whole story is right there. Gibbon thought that wealth and luxury can be good things, but they may also reflect complacent materialism. The peaceful Romans “abused” their advantages, and their moral fiber was being sapped.
- The Roman “free constitution” that Gibbon speaks of was by now nothing more than a façade. Before there were emperors, Rome had been a republic governed by the Senate, a body of several hundred patricians who voted on policies and laws. They gave executive responsibility to a pair of consuls—a pair, not just one, because it was deliberate policy that no single person should rule. The consuls’ term of office lasted just one year. They could then be renewed, and often were, but the principle was clear: their position was temporary.
- The common people had no vote. It was theoretically the Senate, acting on behalf of the people, that governed the Empire and gave orders to the army. But by the end of the last century B.C., that was nothing but a fiction. Beginning with Julius Caesar, the entire empire was ruled by a single individual. That’s why Gibbon uses the telling word “appeared”: The Senate only appeared to possess the sovereign authority.

Historical Background

- The city of Rome was supposedly founded in the 8th century B.C. Gradually, Rome expanded its influence in the central part of the Italian Peninsula, assimilating other small cities into its orbit.
- By the 3rd century B.C., Rome was becoming an empire. It controlled the Italian Peninsula and Sicily, part of the Balkans, and Greece. In a





Julius Caesar
(c. 100 B.C.E.—44 B.C.E.)

series of Punic Wars, Rome next destroyed the great North African power of Carthage, whose general was the famous Hannibal.

- In the 1st century B.C. there were civil wars once again, and the result turned out to be the death of the Republic. Julius Caesar was governor of Gaul at the time, the region that is now France, with parts of Belgium, Germany, and Italy as well. In the year 49 B.C., the Senate ordered him to return to Rome, because his term of office was over. He did return, but he brought his army with him. After winning the battles that followed, Caesar seized supreme power.
- Many senators were appalled at this development, and they began to plan secretly to overthrow him. Five years later, they succeeded. On the Ides of March—the 15th of March—in 44 B.C., Caesar was assassinated in the Senate by Brutus and a group of fellow conspirators. This was a last-ditch attempt to restore the Republic, and it failed. Power was then divided among a triumvirate of three generals. Caesar had been a member of an earlier triumvirate; this

Second Triumvirate included Lepidus, Mark Antony, and Octavian, each of whom hoped to eliminate the others.

- Lepidus was defeated first, then Antony and Octavian fought it out. Octavian, who was only 19 when Caesar died, had a strong claim to the throne: He was Caesar's adopted son and chosen successor. After years of rivalry with Antony, Octavian achieved victory in the naval battle of Actium, near Greece, in 31 B.C. The Senate acknowledged him as sole ruler and honored him with the name of Augustus, which is how we remember him today. That is where Gibbon's story begins.

Roman Geography

- It is helpful at the beginning of the *Decline and Fall* to get a mental picture of the layout of the Empire and some of its most important provinces. Gibbon does this himself at some length, but he doesn't always make clear what the modern equivalents are for the old provinces.
- Let's start with Western Europe. Britannia is Britain, of course; Belgica is essentially Belgium. There was a Germania Inferior ("Lower Germany") corresponding to the modern Netherlands, and a Germania Superior ("Upper Germany") further south up the Rhine. Most of modern Germany lay outside the Empire, however—everything east of the Rhine. Occasionally the Romans tried advancing beyond the Rhine, and they always got driven back.
- Gaul—modern France—was divided into three parts. The Iberian Peninsula likewise had three provinces, the westernmost of which was Lusitania—modern Portugal.
- So far, the ancient map corresponds closely to the modern. Moving eastward from Upper Germany, we come to a long string of provinces that played a crucial role in the defense of the Empire. Over the centuries, they were a buffer against invaders from further east, and, as time went by, they even produced emperors.

- The first of them is Raetia, which was basically modern Bavaria, with parts of modern Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. Continuing east toward the Balkans, we come to Noricum, where eastern Austria is now, and then Upper and Lower Pannonia. That corresponds to modern Hungary and Slovenia. The northern boundary of all these provinces was the Danube River.
- South of Pannonia was Dalmatia—modern Croatia. Then came Upper and Lower Moesia, a large region corresponding to parts of Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. North of the Danube there was a trouble zone centered on the Transylvanian Alps, where Romania is today. There was bitter fighting there, and eventually the Romans gained control of that region as the province of Dacia.
- South of Dacia, running down to the Aegean Sea, was Thrace, and then several provinces corresponding to modern Macedonia and Greece. That concludes our tour from west to east, to the north of the Mediterranean.

Augustus
(63 B.C.E.—14 C.E.)



- The territory of modern Turkey and the area just to the south were divided into more than a dozen provinces. Below further south were Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Arabia. And we finish our tour, moving westward this time, with a string of provinces along the southern shores of the Mediterranean, from Egypt in the east to Mauritania in the west.
- Depending on how you divide them up, there were at least three dozen Roman provinces. This was a truly enormous expanse, roughly 2,500 miles from west to east. To go from one end to the other would take you several weeks by sea or several months by land. Slow though it was, ocean travel was the preferred method of moving goods. Land transport of heavy loads was incredibly difficult.
- It was a never-ending challenge to administer and defend the enormous expanse of the Roman Empire. In part, the Romans solved the problem by extending citizenship to leading individuals everywhere. Some of the most distinguished people we remember as “Romans” were actually natives of Gaul and Spain. Another policy was to permit a good deal of self-government in the more stable provinces, which generally kept their own calendars, coinage, and legal systems.

The Roman Army

- The sheer size of the Empire generated fundamental problems, which Gibbon highlights as his story proceeds. These problems generally center upon the army, which had roughly 500,000 soldiers, all of whom had to be paid and supplied. That ate up three-quarters of the annual budget, sometimes more.
- The Roman army was made up of highly professional troops, and it was their skill—under experienced leadership—that made them seem almost invincible. The army was indispensable for the security of the far-flung Empire, but its size and discipline also made it a potential threat.

- However much he disapproved of the army's excessive influence, Gibbon was fascinated by its organization and tactics. The many battle scenes in the *Decline and Fall* are full of vivid, convincing detail. At this point, still at the very beginning of the book, Gibbon devotes several pages to describing the Roman military.
- The basic unit was the legion, with about 5,000 men subdivided into groups called centuries. As the name implies, centuries were originally made up of 100 men. That proved too large to command efficiently, however so centuries were reduced to 80 men. Each century was commanded by a centurion. Gibbon goes on to describe the weapons the troops used—their swords, javelins, and artillery, such as ballistae and catapults.
- What especially impressed Gibbon was the Roman military's tight discipline and rigorous drilling, which was repeated every day, in peacetime as well as in war. The Romans understood that a well-drilled army had a big advantage over fierce but disorganized barbarians.
- The general's headquarters in each army camp was known as the praetorium, and the crack troops who defended it were known as praetorian guards. In Rome, the Praetorian Guards were the only body allowed to bear arms within the city. That made them formidable in defense, but also well positioned to launch attacks of their own. Before long, they would abuse their power. As Gibbon says:

As the authors of almost every revolution that distracted the Empire, the Praetorians will very soon and very loudly demand our attention.

- For now, all of that is still in the future, although the seeds of disaster are germinating underground. Gibbon goes on to describe how the wise policies of Augustus kept disaster at bay for the time being.

The Wisdom of Augustus

- Augustus was convinced that the Empire was plenty big enough. His “valuable legacy,” Gibbon says, was to urge his successors to respect “those limits which Nature seemed to have placed as its permanent bulwarks and boundaries: on the west the Atlantic Ocean; the Rhine and Danube on the north; the Euphrates on the east; and towards the south, the sandy deserts of Arabia and Africa.”
- Cunningly, Augustus never used the title “emperor.” That was associated with Asiatic despotism. The game Augustus played, as Gibbon’s first paragraph emphasizes, was to create the illusion that he was merely carrying out the commands of the Senate—whereas in reality, the senators were his puppets. So he called himself princeps, and his rule was known as the principate. He thus pretended to be nothing more than the Prince of Rome.
- In the short run, this was a brilliant policy. After Julius Caesar had shattered the old order, it was probably impossible for anyone to put the old pieces back together again. What Gibbon deeply admires in Augustus—and in some wise successors who are introduced later—was that even though they wielded enormous power, they abstained from obviously arbitrary acts.
- There was a saying in ancient times that it would have been better if Augustus had never been born, or if he had never died. If he had never entered the picture, maybe the competing rivals for the throne would have knocked each other off, and the old Roman constitution might have been restored.
- Because Augustus was born, and did become the sole ruler, he left a ticking time bomb. Sooner or later, the sole ruler would turn out to be a really vicious tyrant. At least three of them—Caligula, Nero, and Commodus—were absolute psychopaths. And it didn’t take long for them to show up: Augustus was succeeded by Tiberius, and Tiberius was succeeded by Caligula.

Suggested Reading

Beard, *SPQR*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does the identification of wealth with a morally destructive “luxury” seem dated and unpersuasive today?
2. Does it seem plausible that the Roman Republic could have been restored after the assassination of Caesar if Augustus had been willing to behave differently? And from a modern perspective, was a government by several hundred unelected patricians really what we would call a republic?



The Theory and Practice of History

The *Decline and Fall* combines two completely different approaches to history: the big-picture philosophical overview and the scrupulous interpretation of data. In this lecture, you'll examine the methods Gibbon used that have allowed his opus to survive as a great work of history, rather than simply a dated piece of literature.

Philosophical Historians

- A fundamental axiom for Enlightenment thinkers was that we have no trouble understanding people from long ago, because human nature never changes. David Hume, in his philosophical treatise *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, said so explicitly. These are Hume's words:

Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.

- Hume also wrote an essay entitled "Of the Study of History," and there he made a related claim that was equally confident (some would call complacent). We read history, Hume said,

to see all the human race from the beginning of time pass, as it were, in review before us, appearing in their true colors, without any of those disguises which during their lifetime so much perplexed the judgment of the beholders.

- Philosophical historians like Hume not only saw themselves as standing in judgment over the past, they also flattered themselves that they could do it with perfect objectivity. They showed little awareness that they had their own agendas. In the politics of the time, few philosophical historians were radicals, but all of them were progressives, and they were determined to influence current events. They were less interested in the past for its own sake than they were in using their version of the past as ammunition for their cultural campaign.
- The most popular philosophical historian was Voltaire, who—among other works—wrote a history called *The Century of Louis XIV* and another called *The History of the Empire of Russia under Peter the Great*. From Voltaire's perspective, history ought to celebrate



Voltaire
(1694–1778)



charismatic leaders who use their power to reshape their nations—Peter the Great in Russia, Louis XIV in France. If Voltaire had written a version of the *Decline and Fall*, he would have been much less critical of the Roman emperors and their absolute power than Gibbon was.

- This is not to say that Gibbon thought a historian could be—or even should be—totally objective. He too brought the values of his own time and social class to his work, and he freely acknowledged that. But it's one thing to have a personal point of view, and another to manipulate evidence to push a political agenda. In chapter 20 of the *Decline and Fall*, he makes an excellent distinction: He says his goal is to write with impartiality, but not with indifference.

Gibbon's Approach

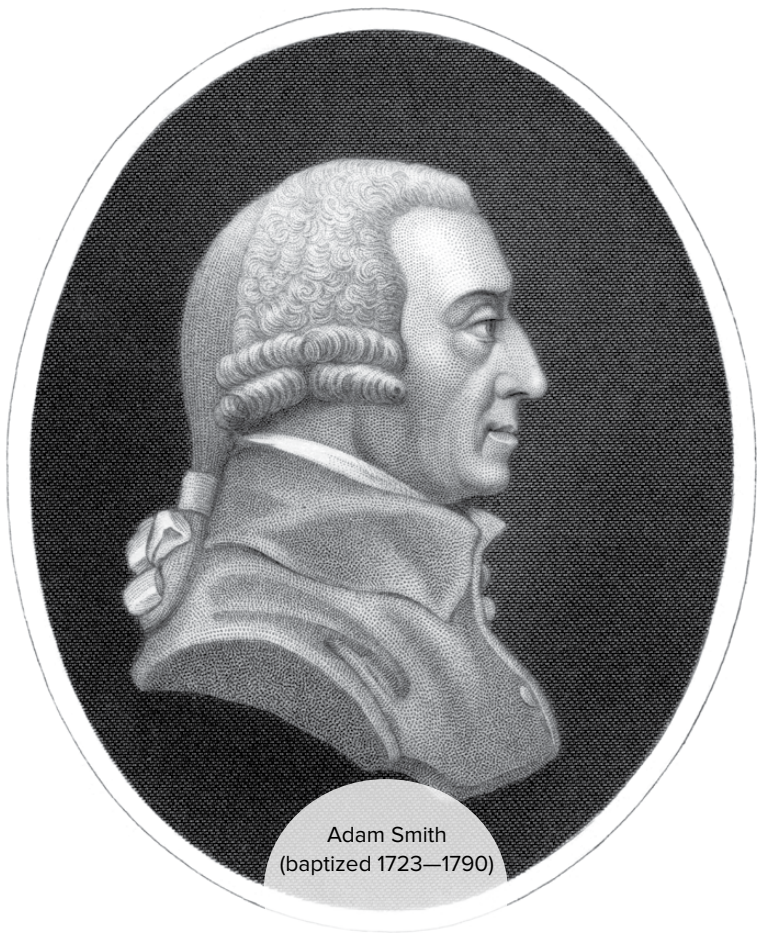
- Gibbon's very first publication was a short book titled *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* ("Essay on the Study of Literature"). His theme in that early book would still be endorsed by any historian working today. It's this: Just as facts without thinking are hollow, likewise ideas are hollow unless they are grounded in facts.
- In Gibbon's view, the task of the modern historian is to listen to ancient writers with an open mind. Whenever they seem to misrepresent and distort, it's important to say so. But all the same, they remain our best guides to what went on when they were alive. Gibbon did not entirely sympathize with the assumption of writers like Voltaire and Hume that they always knew better than their ancestors.
- Many historians, even today, can be tempted to write as if they had total understanding of what happened long ago. But the best historians have always known what Gibbon knew: that readers learn much more from being taken behind the scenes to ponder the evidence along with the author. Sometimes the evidence can seem conclusive, but much of the time, the evidence is anything but conclusive. In those instances, it is the historian's job is to help us evaluate it.

- All the way through the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon takes us with him in that quest, which is a major reason for the continued greatness of his book. Just listen to the following statement from the beginning of chapter 10. Gibbon is setting out to describe what he calls a “calamitous period” at the middle of the 3rd century A.D.:

The confusion of the times and the scarcity of authentic memorials oppose equal difficulties to the historian who attempts to preserve a clear and unbroken thread of narration. Surrounded with imperfect fragments, always concise, often obscure, and sometimes contradictory, he is reduced to collect, to compare, and to conjecture.

- The historian would like to give a “clear and unbroken thread,” but he shouldn’t pretend to do so when it’s simply not possible. Gibbon’s sequence of adjectives supplies a meaningful progression: Even when the surviving materials seem reliable, they tend to be “concise”—they don’t tell us nearly as much as we would like to know. More often, they are “obscure.” What probably seemed obvious 1,000 years ago may be hard to make sense of today. And frequently, they are “contradictory.” In that case, they don’t add up to a single story at all, and we therefore have to interrogate and evaluate them.
- Gibbon’s dismissal of philosophical historians such as Voltaire does not mean that he dismissed theorizing altogether. He admired theory, but only so long as it was grounded in what he calls “knowledge and reflection.” Gibbon admired Adam Smith, for example, whose *Wealth of Nations* is informed by detailed analysis of how economies actually work.
- Among French Enlightenment writers, Gibbon’s hero was the Baron de Montesquieu, who was a truly original thinker, as the popularizer Voltaire never was. Montesquieu’s masterpiece was *The Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748. Though Montesquieu was a lawyer by profession, he was interested not just in legal codes in the narrow sense, but in what they can tell us about the societies that developed them. His goal was to





understand each society as a complex whole, shaped by the interaction of social, political, and environmental factors.

- Montesquieu was thus a theorist whose ideas were valuable for historians, but he was not a historian himself. In modern terms, he was a pioneer sociologist, less interested in the details of history

than in larger structural patterns that he hoped to establish. But the details were precisely what fascinated Gibbon—the ever shifting kaleidoscope of human experience. And Gibbon never forgot that the patterns a theorist might come up with are only intellectual constructs, abstracted from the lived reality of each successive cultural moment.

The Fine Print

- There are an incredible number of footnotes in the *Decline and Fall*—7,920, by one count. From the point of view of the space they take up on the page, Gibbon's footnotes occupy fully one-quarter of the book.
- We are so accustomed to footnotes today that we may not suspect how original Gibbon was in providing them. Previous writers supplied only vague references to their sources—or more often, no references at all. As a result, you can never be sure where those writers are getting their information, and you have no way of going back to the originals to see whether they distorted, misunderstood, or omitted anything.
- This is where Gibbon's intellectual temperament was so valuable. He loved compelling stories, but he also loved their foundation in factual detail. Philosophical historians played fast and loose with chronology; Gibbon was fascinated by chronology. He understood that if you don't get the sequence of events right, you can't possibly make sense of what was going on.
- Many of Gibbon's footnotes simply register sources, but many more of them represent an ongoing conversation with the reader, more intimate than would have seemed appropriate in the body of the text. When we read the *Decline and Fall*, we are invited inside it in a way that few works of history attempt. And there are frequent moments of deadpan wit that would likewise not belong in the main narrative.
- Gibbon remarks with disgust that the French historians hardly ever quote anybody from the past. The only voice in their histories is their



own. Gibbon loves to quote. Right at the end of the *Decline and Fall*, he quotes the words of a “simple citizen” who witnessed a public humiliation of the barons of Rome:

Bareheaded, their hands crossed on their breast, they stood with downcast looks in the presence of the Tribune; and they trembled, good God, how they trembled!

In a footnote, Gibbon gives the original Italian and comments, “He saw them, and we see them.”

Suggested Reading

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Tacitus, *Annals*.

———, *Histories*.

Questions to Consider

1. How serious a handicap was it for 18th-century historians that they assumed people in ancient cultures were just like them?
2. How often do you find historians in our own time sharing with the reader the challenge of evaluating evidence?
3. Is David Hume at all persuasive when he argues that historical hindsight allows us to understand developments better than people at the time could understand them?



LECTURE 5

The Golden Age of the Antonines

In chapters 2 and 3 of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon lays out a picture of the Roman Empire in the 2nd century A.D. His narrative in these chapters spans the successive reigns of five emperors: Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. In this lecture, you will examine Gibbon's account of this important period in Roman history.

In the Beginning

- Gibbon begins his narrative of the Roman Empire with the successive reigns of the Antonines, who are also sometimes referred to as the Five Good Emperors. This period begins with the accession of Nerva in A.D. 96 and continues until the death of Marcus Aurelius in A.D. 180. Later on, though, Gibbon had second thoughts about beginning the story where he did. He wrote down this note to himself:

Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil wars that ensued after the fall of Nero? Or even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas! I should; but of what avail is this tardy knowledge? Where error is irretrievable, repentance is useless.

- There was certainly a persuasive reason why Gibbon might have started his story earlier than he did. The second emperor after the great Augustus was the appalling Caligula, and the second one after Caligula was Nero. Shouldn't the story of Rome's "decline and fall" begin with two of the most vicious emperors who ever lived?
- Gibbon had good reasons for his original plan, however. Back in the 1st century A.D., one might still think that an occasional dreadful emperor was just an exception to the rule. It still seemed that the system would always stabilize itself after each temporary rocking of the boat. By starting with the Golden Age of Rome, Gibbon wanted to show not just that occasional bad eggs appear from time to time—as they do in any political system—but that the entire Roman system was infected by a hidden rotteness.
- Gibbon's description of the Golden Age in chapter 3 has become famous. It starts like this:

If a man were called to fix the period of the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous he would, without hesitation, name that

which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.

- Domitian was a tyrant who was assassinated; his successor was Nerva, the first of the Antonines. Commodus was the son of the magnificent philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius—but shockingly, he turned out to be a monster. That possibility was one reason why the Romans were reluctant to permit hereditary succession.
- The Golden Age was an extraordinarily happy period, but what Gibbon goes on to say echoes what he said in the first chapter:

The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the republic, had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom.

- The Good Emperors preserved the forms, but even though they wanted to, they couldn't preserve the substance. They delighted in the image of liberty, but it was too late to restore liberty itself. What followed, of course, was the collapse of that temporary stability.

The Golden Age

- There was a proverbial saying that Augustus found Rome brick and made it marble. As Gibbon saw with his own eyes when he visited Rome, even the ruins of its great public buildings were still magnificent.
- Rome was the hub of an extraordinary volume of international commerce, and great buildings were not confined to the capital. They appeared throughout the Empire, as symbols of civic pride. Gibbon waxes eloquent about these structures:

All the provinces of the Empire were embellished by the same liberal spirit of public magnificence, and were filled with amphitheaters, theaters, porticos, triumphal arches, baths, and aqueducts, all variously conducive to the health, the devotion, and the pleasures of the meanest citizen.

- The city of Rome enjoyed special privileges, and people in the provinces might well resent their role in supplying resources to the capital. But the masterstroke of Roman policy was to give full citizenship to leading individuals everywhere. The result was very different from the cynically exploited colonies of the European powers in Gibbon's own day.
- The Italian Peninsula itself was unified in a way that was no longer the case when Gibbon was writing. As he admiringly describes it:

From the foot of the Alps to the extremity of Calabria, all the natives of Italy were born citizens of Rome. Their partial distinctions were obliterated, and they insensibly coalesced into one great nation united by language, manners, and civil institutions, and equal to the weight of a powerful empire.

- The Roman Empire had another great virtue, in Gibbon's opinion: its undogmatic attitude toward religion. Faiths from all over the world were freely tolerated, so long as none of them insisted on replacing all the others. (That would be the major reason, later on, why Christianity couldn't be assimilated.) As for the official pagan religion of Rome, Gibbon says in an essay that it was "a matter not of opinion, but of custom." That is, it had no doctrinal theology, and no one had to testify to specific beliefs.

Blind Spots

- Gibbon presents the Golden Age of Rome as seen from above, through the eyes of the patricians who took their privileges for granted—just as he took his. So although the picture is accurate as far

as it goes, there is much of importance that it leaves out. The biggest blind spot of all is Gibbon's failure to make clear that the opulent ancient economy was only possible because of slavery.

- Gibbon knew that there were slaves, of course, but he was at pains to gloss over the injustice that entailed. So he says, soothingly:

The sentiments of nature, the habits of education, and the possession of a dependent species of property contributed to alleviate the hardships of servitude.

- It was true that slaves could have families and own a modest amount of personal property. It was also true that some of them were well educated. In fact, the tutors of the children of patricians were often slaves. There were many freedmen, too, for as Gibbon goes on to say, masters often rewarded slaves in their wills with “the inestimable gift of freedom.” And there was an important difference between ancient and modern slavery: people became slaves through simple bad luck, such as being captured in war, and were not regarded as inherently inferior.
- All the same, slavery is slavery. There were sometimes revolts, like the famous one led by the gladiator Spartacus in 73 B.C., but those were ruthlessly punished, and ordinary slaves had no choice but to keep the Empire going through backbreaking labor.
- Even from a strictly economic point of view, Gibbon seems not much interested in the significance of slavery. Adam Smith saw clearly that it was slavery that made possible the public-spirited “virtue” Gibbon admires so much in the leisured patrician class. Smith also argued that slaves performed so many tasks that free plebeians had trouble finding work at all. He thought that was the principal reason why the ancient world never developed a market economy.
- Gibbon also exaggerates the contentedness of people in the provinces. There again, the upper crust—enjoying Roman citizenship—might feel good about their lives, but not all of their subjects did. For

most people, whether they were slaves or free, life was not just hard, it was shockingly dangerous.

- Gibbon knew there were sometimes rebellions and even civil wars, but he thought of them as temporary interruptions. He was fond of medical metaphors, and when he did mention a rebellion, he liked to add reassuring comments such as this one: “The wounds of civil discord would be completely healed.” He never refers at all to the major Jewish revolt during the time of Hadrian, or the earlier one that ended with the fall of Masada. As for the peoples whom Gibbon lumps together as “barbarians,” he takes it for granted that the Romans were always justified in attacking and subduing them.

Marcus Aurelius

- At the end of chapter 3, we meet the most celebrated of the Antonines, chosen expressly for their wisdom and integrity. The elder, known as Antoninus Pius, was a 50-year-old senator when he became emperor. His nephew, Marcus Aurelius, was a young man of 19 who had been planning to devote his life to philosophy.
- The emperor Hadrian adopted Antoninus Pius as his son, thus confirming a worthy successor—with the stipulation that Antoninus Pius should, in turn, adopt Marcus Aurelius. As Gibbon puts it, Hadrian “resolved to deserve the thanks of posterity, by placing the most exalted merit on the Roman throne.”
- After Hadrian died in A.D. 138, Antoninus Pius ruled for 23 years, and Marcus Aurelius for another 19. “Their united reigns,” Gibbon says, “are possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government.”
- Marcus Aurelius has always inspired admiration for the earnestness with which he accepted his arduous duties—including acting as a successful general in the northern provinces, even though that was a life he would never have chosen for himself.



- We remember Marcus Aurelius best today not as a ruler, but as an author. His *Meditations* are a classic expression of the philosophy of Stoicism, which teaches that a commitment to reason can equip us to endure pain and suffering unflinchingly.
- Here is a characteristic declaration in the *Meditations*:

Be like a rocky cliff, against which the surf continually pounds. I hear you say, “How unlucky that this should happen to me!” Not at all! Say instead, “How lucky that I am not broken by what has happened and I am not afraid of what is about to happen.” The same blow might have struck anyone, but not many would have absorbed it without complaint.

- The historian Michael Grant calls Marcus Aurelius “the noblest of all the men who, by sheer intelligence and force of character, have prized and achieved goodness for its own sake, and not for any reward.”

- What Gibbon might have added in his admiring account of Marcus Aurelius is that this stern philosophy reflects a sense of continual threat from a world filled with dangerous surprises. Not even an emperor is safe, so he retreats into an interior fortress and tries to suppress his normal emotions.
- The five Antonines—beginning with Nerva and ending with Marcus Aurelius—ruled for 84 years, from 96–180. Somebody whose lifetime happened to coincide with that span might have thought that peace and happiness had arrived to stay. But they would have been wrong, and Gibbon invokes one of his medical metaphors to say so:

It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the Empire.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*.

Grant, *The Climax of Rome*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does Gibbon make a convincing case for regarding the Golden Age of Rome as the happiest period in the history of the human race?
2. To what extent is Gibbon's positive picture undercut by the institution of slavery as the foundation of the ancient economy?
3. How does the Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius reflect the growing threats to peace and security?



LECTURE 6

The Hidden Poison Begins to Work

In Chapters 4–7 of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon's narrative begins to pick up speed. Beginning with the reign of Commodus, one emperor after another would be installed on the throne, rule briefly, and then be abruptly replaced. What Gibbon calls the hidden poison was now at work: The system itself was structurally sick, and the occasional good emperor would be the exception to the rule.

Commodus

- As soon as Commodus came to power, it became obvious that he was an appalling sadist. He enjoyed seeing people killed, when he didn't kill them himself. As Gibbon puts it, "When Commodus had once tasted human blood, he became incapable of pity or remorse."
- Gibbon is so puzzled by the bloodthirstiness of Commodus that he feels obliged to cook up some kind of explanation. So he claims that Commodus must have originally been weak by nature:

His simplicity and timidity rendered him the slave of his attendants, who gradually corrupted his mind. His cruelty, which at first obeyed the dictates of others, degenerated into habit and at length became the ruling passion of the soul.

- Whether or not Gibbon can explain the behavior of Commodus, he knows how to describe it memorably. Commodus liked to perform as a gladiator in the Colosseum; he did that over 700 times. Sometimes he killed other gladiators. Equally enjoyable was slaughtering vast numbers of animals, which were imported from distant provinces for the occasion. Gibbon describes what would happen, as the creatures were turned loose to charge at helpless human victims:

Whether Commodus aimed at the head or heart of the animal, the wound was alike certain and mortal. With arrows, whose point was shaped in the form of a crescent, Commodus often intercepted the rapid career and cut asunder the long bony neck of the ostrich. A panther was let loose, and the archer waited till he had leaped upon a trembling malefactor. In the same instant the shaft flew, the beast dropped dead, and the man remained unhurt. The dens of the amphitheater disgorged at once a hundred lions; a hundred darts from the unerring hand of Commodus laid them dead, as they ran raging around the arena.



Commodus
(161 C.E.—192 C.E.)



- Vivid as this description is, it's remarkable to discover what Gibbon didn't take over from his ancient source. This is what was recorded by a Roman historian, Dio Cassius:

Here is another thing that he did to us senators, which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off its head, he came up to where we were sitting holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword. Though he spoke not a word, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us the same way.

- Apparently Gibbon left out this startling detail because he thought it would distract from the dramatic unity of his account. He wants to focus on the egotistical display of Commodus killing defenseless animals, and not the message that Commodus was sending to the frightened senators.
- Equally disgraceful, in Gibbon's eyes, was Commodus's sex life. Here he feels obliged to be discreet; he tells us, in carefully general terms:

His hours were spent in a seraglio of three hundred beautiful women, and as many boys. Whenever the arts of seduction proved ineffectual, the brutal lover had recourse to violence. The ancient historians have expiated on these abandoned scenes of prostitution, which scorned every restraint of nature or modesty; but it would not be easy to translate their too-faithful descriptions into the decency of modern language.

- Gibbon's footnote gives a Latin quotation from the *Historia Augusta*, a Roman compilation of biographies. The quotation is indeed more explicit. According to the Latin text,

By the orders of Commodus, his sisters were debauched before his own eyes, and he was not free from the disgrace of intimacy with young men, defiling every part of his body in dealings with persons of either sex.

- After Commodus had ruled for 12 horrible years, he was finally assassinated by his own servants, and a distinguished senator named Pertinax was named emperor.

The Year of the Five Emperors

- Pertinax started out promisingly, but his days were numbered. The Praetorian Guards had enjoyed the favor of Commodus, and they were outraged when Pertinax tried to get them under control. They killed him and displayed his head on a pole. This was the outset of the terrible Year of the Five Emperors.
- The guards, who loved money, literally auctioned off the position of emperor. A wealthy senator named Didius Julianus was fool enough to place the winning bid, and he celebrated his new glory with a splendid feast; but second thoughts were not slow in coming. As Gibbon says, “He had reason to tremble. On the throne of the world, he found himself without a friend, and even without an adherent.”
- What followed was a brief but violent civil war in which the generals in command of the various frontier armies all competed to seize power. When the dust settled in 193 A.D., a general named Septimius Severus emerged as emperor.
- In the hindsight of nearly 2,000 years, Septimius Severus may look like a minor figure, but he wasn’t minor back then—far from it. Thanks to his competence and good sense, he gave 18 years of peace to the tormented Empire.
- Even when Septimius Severus was alive, however, the signs of danger were unmistakable. He had no choice but to share power with the Praetorian Guards, as he was well aware that they could overthrow him any time they felt like it. Their leader was even allowed to marry his daughter to the emperor’s son.

- What impresses Gibbon most about Septimius Severus is not that he maintained peace, but that he also exerted absolute control over the Senate. He didn't even pretend to be carrying out its orders, the way his predecessors had.

From Bad to Worse

- After Septimius Severus came his son Caracalla. As with Marcus Aurelius's son Commodus, Caracalla turned out to be a disaster. His first move was to order centurions to hack his brother and rival to death, which happened while their mother held the bleeding victim desperately in her arms. Afterward, he developed a paranoid fear of anyone who might intend to avenge his murdered brother, and he had at least 20,000 people killed. Gibbon comments that whereas Tiberius and Nero only went after senators, no one in the entire empire was safe from Caracalla—he was “the common enemy of mankind.”
- After six years, even the favored Praetorians had had enough. When Caracalla took a break along a roadside to urinate, one of the guards stabbed him to death. “Such was the end,” Gibbon says, “of a monster whose life disgraced human nature.”
- A pattern was now in place. In earlier days, the Antonines had absolute power, but they were wise enough not to show it. These later emperors apparently thought that the whole point of being emperor was the freedom to commit arbitrary acts. After things got bad enough, the Praetorian Guards would step in yet again. Nearly all the emperors who came and went during this period—and there were a great many of them—were incompetent, or worse.
- One truly disgraceful example was Elagabalus, the third emperor after Caracalla, who ruled from 218–222. As Gibbon relates, Elagabalus made a name for himself as an obsessive gourmet, having fresh fish brought at high speed from distant places and bestowing extravagant rewards on chefs who could invent a new

sauce. If they unluckily came up with a sauce the emperor didn't care for, they were condemned to eat nothing else until they produced something better.

- Still more contemptibly, by traditional Roman standards, Elagabalus's favored administrators were a dancer, a charioteer, and a barber. And as Gibbon rather diplomatically adds, "The master of the Roman world affected to copy the address and manners of the female sex." He publicly declared that his favorite male lover was his "empress," and from then on he referred to himself as "the Empress's husband."
- It's easy to see how this was bound to end. The Guards mutinied against Elagabalus, and he rashly tried to punish them. Gibbon describes, with obvious relish, what they did next:

Arch of Septimius
Severus



Elagabalus was massacred by the indignant Praetorians; his mutilated corpse was dragged through the streets of the city and thrown into the Tiber. His memory was branded with eternal infamy by the Senate, the justice of whose decree has been ratified by posterity.

- We might well ask how on earth the Empire managed to keep going during this period. At the end of chapter 6, Gibbon addresses that point convincingly. However outrageous the behavior of people at the top often was, the Romans were gifted administrators, and it was an impressive permanent bureaucracy that kept the Empire going. Reviewing the available evidence with great care—financial evidence in particular—Gibbon shows how secure the foundations of the system still were.
- At this stage in Roman history, anyone the army supported could become emperor. A rich patrician could even buy the office, although that didn't end well. What often happened was that one of the generals would seize power and use his command of the army to hold on to it. As usual, Gibbon underlines the point forcibly:

The meanest of mankind might entertain a hope of being raised, by valor and fortune, to a rank in the army, in which a single crime would enable him to wrest the scepter of the world from his feeble and unpopular master.

- That is exactly what happened after the death of Caracalla. Years before, Caracalla's father—Septimius Severus—had ordered the army that was stationed in Thrace to put on an athletic competition. The prize in wrestling was won by “a young barbarian of gigantic stature” who successively defeated seven of the strongest Roman soldiers. The emperor thereupon gave him a position in his personal troop of guards. In due course, he rose to the rank of centurion, and eventually general.
- Caracalla was followed by a series of weak and forgettable emperors, until the time came when this former wrestler—this peasant-turned-

soldier—saw his chance to seize power. He then became the emperor Maximin. Because he was well aware that many enemies were jealous of him, his three years of rule were exceptionally brutal.

- By now, a state of nearly continuous civil war had become normal. There was yet another rebellion, in which the soldiers proclaimed a senator named Gordianus as their choice for emperor. When Maximin was assassinated, Gordianus was left in power. He was a worthy individual, but as Gibbon relates,

When he reluctantly accepted the purple [a rich dye that could only be worn by emperors] he was above fourscore years old; a last and valuable remains of the happy age of the Antonines.

- Gordianus shared power with his son, and they are known as the two Gordians. The two Gordians set a record of sorts by ruling for just one single month. In the civil war that immediately erupted, the younger Gordian was killed in battle in the year 238. His father then committed suicide.
- The remainder of chapter 7 carries the story forward for a few more years, up to 248. At that point, a nonentity named Philip was on the throne, and he put on a magnificent spectacle known as the Secular Games. That event gives Gibbon an opportunity to end the chapter with bleak foreboding:

The magnificence of Philip's shows and entertainments dazzled the eyes of the multitude. The devout were employed in the rites of superstition, while the reflecting few revolved in their anxious minds the past history and the future fate of the Empire.

Suggested Reading

Beard, *SPQR*.

Grant, *The Climax of Rome*.

Questions to Consider

1. How uncritically do you think Gibbon accepts the horror stories from ancient writers about the so-called “bad emperors”?
2. Does knowing what Gibbon left out in describing the emperor Commodus suggest ways in which readers today might have different expectations than Gibbon’s contemporaries?



LECTURE 7

Diocletian and the Triumph of Constantine

As the *Decline and Fall* proceeds, the pace of the narrative continues to accelerate. In this lecture, you will be considering chapters 8–14. This portion of the Gibbon’s history examines assaults on the Roman Empire by so-called “barbarian” tribes, the division of the Empire by Diocletian, and the rise of Constantine.

Barbarians and Savages

- In the 3rd century A.D., the Roman army doubled in size to approximately 500,000 men. This absolutely had to happen. The borders of the Empire were under increasing threat from formidable outsiders; there was simply no alternative to a huge standing army if the Empire was going to survive.
- In Gibbon's time, the word "barbarian" had a double meaning: It could mean simply the many ethnic groups outside the Empire, but it could also be a synonym for "uncivilized." Gibbon's contemporary Samuel Johnson gives this definition: "A man uncivilized; untaught; a savage."
- According to a four-stage theory of cultural development that was popular during the Enlightenment, "savages" and "barbarians" were not the same thing at all:
 - "Savages" were primitive hunter-gatherers, living off the land.
 - "Barbarians" were pastoral people, keeping flocks and herds—often nomadically, to move to new grazing grounds or migrate with the seasons. (In this sense, the successive waves of invaders from the steppes of central Asia would all be "barbarians.")
 - After the pastoral phase came agriculture, in which people settled permanently in one place and established farms.
 - Finally, there was commercial civilization, which emerged in the ancient Mediterranean world and again in modern Europe.
- Most of the time Gibbon observes this distinction, and he is willing to acknowledge that "barbarians," in that sense, could have a complex culture of their own—whereas "savages" would not. At other times, however, he treats the words as synonyms. The Romans did the same thing; it suited them ideologically to lump very different peoples together as collectively inferior.

- A number of recent historians have suggested that Rome needed the barbarians. They provided the crucial “other” in the Roman self-image, legitimizing their unique right to rule the earth. And in practical terms, they were the justification for maintaining a huge army, levying heavy taxes support it, and establishing impressive cities and palaces along the Rhine and Danube frontiers.

Gothic Assaults

- At the beginning of chapter 10, Gibbon’s narrative is at the exact middle of the 3rd century. This was a time, Gibbon says, of “uninterrupted confusion and calamity.” For a historian, he frankly admits, there is a serious drawback: very little reliable information has survived. He has no choice but to try to connect the dots, and the dots are often pretty far apart. He tells us: “As far as the barrenness of materials would permit, we have attempted to trace with order and perspicuity the general events of that calamitous period.”



- Chapter 10 describes the first, terrifying assaults by the people known as the Goths. A high point of chapter 10 is the shocking defeat of the emperor Decius, which happened in the year 251 in the Balkan province of Maesia. Gibbon was fascinated by battles, and he often

expresses frustration that his ancient sources are so vague. They tend to focus on individual acts of heroism, not on tactics and strategy.

- For the defeat of Decius, Gibbon had very little to go on, yet he still gives us a memorable account. A Gothic army was thrown back by the Romans in two successive assaults, but when the barbarians retreated into some boggy country, the Romans unwisely pursued. At this point, Gibbon relates:

Here the fortune of the day turned, and all things became adverse to the Romans; the place deep with ooze, sinking under those who stood, slippery to such as advanced; their armor heavy, the waters deep; nor could they wield, in that uneasy situation, their weighty javelins. The barbarians, on the contrary, were inured to encounters in the bogs; their persons tall, their spears long, such as could wound at a distance.

- It's a brilliant description. But surprisingly, as Gibbon tells us in a footnote, he didn't write it himself, and it's about a completely different battle. "I have ventured to copy from Tacitus," he says, "the picture of a similar engagement between a Roman army and a German tribe." The borrowed description in fact concerns the shocking defeat of a large Roman army in the Teutoburg Forest centuries earlier, in A.D. 9.
- So as far as Gibbon is concerned, one battle against the Germans is no different from another. But the Germans in the much earlier account by Tacitus came from tribes in the north, far away from the Balkans. The swamp battle that was lost much later by Decius was something far more dangerous: the beginning of fierce incursions by a people from the remote north, known as Goths.
- The Goths were believed to have originated in Scandinavia, specifically in the large island still known in modern Sweden as Gotland. As Gibbon explains, there were two main tribal divisions, the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, which mean simply "Eastern Goths" and "Western Goths." A related people were called the Vandals, and in

Gibbon's later narrative, the Vandals would eventually rule Spain and North Africa.

- Gibbon also mentions a group known as the Franks, which means “free men.” It was the Franks who gave France its name. Another tribal confederation, known as the Alemanni (“all men”), stayed in Germany.
- After the crushing defeat of Decius in 251, the next 20 years saw yet another power vacuum briefly filled by no fewer than 27 emperors, many of whom ruled jointly with others. Finally, in 270, a general named Aurelian became emperor and successively defeated the Alemanni, the Goths, and the Vandals. The result was a stable peace at long last, for as Gibbon says:

Exhausted by so many calamities, which they had mutually endured and inflicted during a twenty years' war, the Goths and the Romans consented to a lasting and beneficial treaty.

- Aurelian's crucial move was to simply abandon the contested territory of Dacia, where Romania is today. Confining the Empire within its natural boundaries was what Augustus had counseled long before. Aurelius's judgment, Gibbon concludes, “convinced him of the solid advantages, and taught him to despise the seeming disgrace, of thus contracting the frontiers of the monarchy.”
- After five years of rule, Aurelian was assassinated, the victim of yet another coup by the Praetorian Guards. There followed a brief interval of peace that lasted a mere eight months, and Gibbon pauses to stress how exceptional it was, by this time, that it happened at all. He calls this brief interlude “an amazing period of tranquil anarchy, during which the Roman world remained without a sovereign, without a usurper, and without a sedition.” Needless to say, the “tranquil anarchy” couldn't last, and seditions and usurpers would soon reappear.



Diocletian Divides the Empire

- Aurelian died in 275, followed by the almost inevitable blur of 22 emperors during just nine years, many of them ruling jointly once again. Gibbon hurries through the list, pausing only to notice the final fate of the Roman Senate, which made a pathetic attempt to reassert its authority. As he puts it, “The expiring Senate displayed a sudden lustre, blazed for a moment, and was extinguished forever.”
- Finally, in 284, a major figure emerged. This was Diocletian, the last emperor of the 3rd century, who ruled from 284–305. Diocletian was an army officer from Dalmatia (modern-day Croatia) with no particular affinity for Rome. The chain of Balkan provinces along the Danube were collectively called “Illyricum,” and Diocletian was therefore known as an Illyrian emperor.
- It was Diocletian’s insight that it was simply not possible for one individual to rule the far-flung provinces from a single capital. So he divided the Empire into four separate administrative sections, with three corulers as his colleagues. They were known as the tetrarchy—“the rule of four.”
- The location of the four administrative centers illustrates how much power had shifted away from Rome. Two centers were in the East: one at Nicomedia, in what is now northern Turkey, and another at Antioch, in southern Turkey. A third was at Trier, on the banks of the Moselle River in modern Germany. Closest to Rome was Mediolanum, whose name later mutated into Milan. Located in northern Italy, it was effectively the capital of the Empire.
- Modern historians are particularly impressed with Diocletian’s economic reforms. He made an impressive effort to reorganize taxes and to get runaway inflation under control. The economy as a whole was increasingly subject to governmental control. But Gibbon never gives more than passing attention to economic issues, and it would in fact be many years before historians would grasp the significance of these reforms.



Diocletian's
Palace

- After an impressive rule of 21 years, Diocletian broke precedent by actually resigning and going into retirement. Gibbon describes how one of Diocletian's successors came to urge him to reassume the throne. Diocletian's reply was to show some cabbages that he had planted with his own hands and ask why he should "relinquish the enjoyment of happiness for the pursuit of power."



- Diocletian is probably best known today for a savage persecution of Christians that occurred during his regime, and it is notable that Gibbon never mentions it at all at this point. Other writers would have foregrounded it. Gibbon intends to take up the persecutions—and to question just how ferocious they really were—in a later chapter.
- Gibbon's 18th-century readers would have realized that by ignoring Diocletian's persecution of Christians at this point in the narrative, Gibbon was refusing to let the history of the Church control the story of the Empire. In chapters 15 and 16, he will make that strategy explicit. Here, he simply postpones it without comment.
- Something else that Gibbon largely postpones are threats to the Empire not from the barbarian north, but from the rival empire of Persia and other powers in the East.

The Rise of Constantine

- At the end of chapter 14, there is one more important character to meet, and he is someone of extraordinary significance. This is the emperor Constantine, who will move the capital of the Empire permanently to a brand-new city on the banks of the Bosphorus, the strait that connects the Mediterranean and the Black Seas and divides Europe from Asia Minor. He named the new city after himself: Constantinople.
- We will get to know Constantine and Constantinople intimately before long. In the 5th century, when the Empire in the West finally collapses, it will be Constantinople keeps the Empire going for another 1,000 years. Still more significantly, Constantine will become a convert to Christianity and will make it the official religion of the Empire. That will be a decisive historical turning point from which enormous consequences follow.
- At this point in the narrative, however, Constantine appears on the scene as just one more claimant to the throne, like so many dozens before him. His father, Constantius, had been one of the rulers

under Diocletian, and during that time, the young Constantine distinguished himself as a general.

- When Constantius died in 306, Constantine was stationed in Britain at Eboracum (modern-day York). As often happened at such times, his troops acclaimed him emperor, and during a series of civil wars, he defeated his rivals and became sole ruler.
- By leaving aside for now the story of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, Gibbon shows that he is committed to finishing up the story of the decay of the Empire as a purely secular phenomenon. In other words, he refuses to do what historians up until then thought of as inevitable. Instead of treating history as controlled by divine providence, he has been following religion and worldly affairs on separate tracks.
- The very last words of chapter 14 bring into the open just how profoundly things are about to change. After continued civil wars, in 324 Constantine at last made himself sole ruler throughout the vast empire. Gibbon describes how this would play out:

By this victory of Constantine, the Roman world was again united under the authority of one emperor, thirty-seven years after Diocletian had divided his power and provinces. The foundation of Constantinople and the establishment of the Christian religion were the immediate and memorable consequences of this revolution.

- From this point forward, the history of the Roman Empire will be religious as well as secular. But as Gibbon sees it, it's still not the story of providential intervention. Instead, it will be the story of a sect that transformed itself into an institutional church and became inextricably bound up with political power.



Suggested Reading

Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*.

Questions to Consider

1. What connotations for the word “barbarian” come to mind today? Is it, by its very nature, a prejudicial term to describe the peoples Gibbon applies it to?
2. How much validity might a modern cultural anthropologist find in the Enlightenment schema progressing from savagery through barbarism and farming, culminating in commerce?
3. What were Diocletian’s crucial measures to arrest the fragmentation of the Empire?



Enlightenment Skepticism

The next few chapters of the *Decline and Fall* are devoted to a comprehensive account of the rise of Christianity. Before moving on to those chapters, however, it's important to establish just how dangerous Gibbon's treatment of Christianity seemed to most of his readers. In this lecture, you will examine the role of empiricism during the Enlightenment, the influential ideas of Scottish philosopher David Hume, and Gibbon's own views on religion.

Empiricism and the Enlightenment

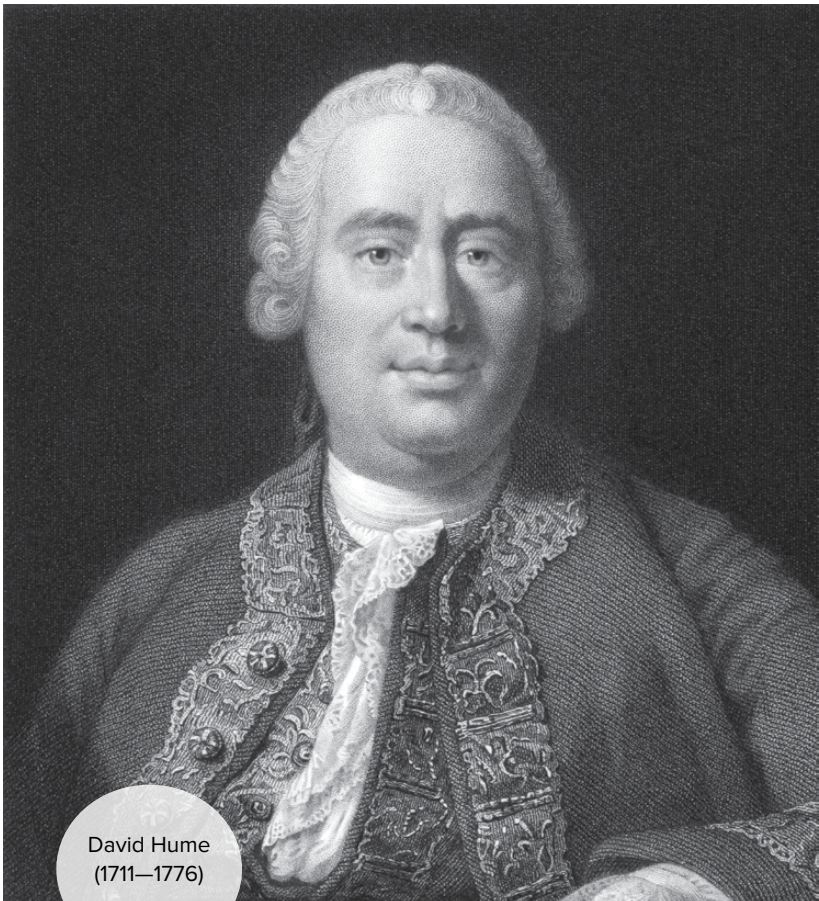
- The Enlightenment was a movement—a way of thinking—rather than an organized program. It never got much of a foothold in England, where it was suspected of political radicalism and religious skepticism. It made more headway in Scotland; Scottish philosopher David Hume, who spent many years in France, was very much an Enlightenment intellectual.
- Key to the Enlightenment was the philosophy of empiricism, which originated in England, was championed by the French philosophes, and rapidly became the default way of explaining almost everything. The fundamental axiom of empiricism was this: There is nothing in our minds that didn't come in through our senses.
- For empiricist thinkers, certainty is never possible; estimates of probability are the best we can do. The empiricist viewpoint was deeply empowering for modern science, which stopped reasoning from axioms and concentrated instead on devising experiments that could test each hypothesis.
- Many religious thinkers throughout history have refused to accept that belief can or should rest on demonstrable evidence. Kierkegaard said in the 19th century, “There is only one relation to revealed truth: believing it.” But the philosophy of empiricism was enormously attractive in the 18th century, and many people wanted evidence for their beliefs.
- The painful experience of recent history strongly influenced people's thinking. In the 1640s and 1650s, radical Puritans had claimed they had a divine mandate to behead king Charles I, and they replaced the monarchy with a religious theocracy. The country quickly tired of Puritan rule, however, and brought back the son of the murdered king as Charles II.
- From then on, claims of spiritual inspiration were regularly denounced under the names of “fanaticism” and “enthusiasm.” “Enthusiasm” comes from a Greek word meaning “possessed by a god,” and all

through the 18th century, the word had a negative connotation. Samuel Johnson defined it as follows: “Fancied inspiration; a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favor or communication.”

- In Gibbon’s time, most believers wanted to rest religion not on interior inspiration, but on factual proof. Such proof was called “the evidences of Christianity” and was intended to satisfy the criteria of empiricism to successfully test and verify assertions of every kind.
- As Gibbon relates in his *Memoirs*, an empirical approach to religious claims was the primary reason for his startling conversion to Catholicism. An Anglican clergyman named Conyers Middleton had recently argued that evidence for early miracles—which were accepted by Protestants and Catholics alike—was even more dubious than later miracles accepted only by Catholics. He concluded that probably none of the miracles ever happened at all. Plenty of religious writers rushed to denounce Middleton’s book.
- When young Gibbon read Middleton’s book, he was impressed—but he turned Middleton’s logic upside down. Middleton had made a case for believing either that all miracles were fake or else none of them were. At that early time in his life, Gibbon wasn’t ready to reject the idea of miracles altogether, so it seemed obvious to him that he should join the church that went on recording miracles right up to the present day.
- Although Gibbon later returned to Protestantism, he began to absorb the skepticism of the Enlightenment—a much more extensive skepticism than Middleton’s.

David Hume

- The most brilliant of all the skeptical writers on religion was David Hume. Gibbon’s views on religion were deeply indebted to Hume, and the two eventually became friends. Hume’s arguments are directly echoed in the *Decline and Fall*.



- An important chapter in one of Hume's books, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, is titled "Of Miracles." Hume was a thoroughgoing empiricist, so he took it as obvious that what we perceive with our own senses is always more reliable than what we learn from hearsay. As a good empiricist, he held also that we must always weigh probabilities; if we haven't experienced something first-hand, we need to be especially distrustful of reports by other people that don't seem probable.

- Hume's ideas hit Christians right where they were most vulnerable. His argument was potentially devastating for the miracles described in the Bible itself, including the ones performed by Jesus and his first disciples. Skepticism on that score is what Gibbon deploys brilliantly in chapters 15–16 of the *Decline and Fall*.
- Another work that influenced Gibbon deeply was Hume's essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," which Hume described as opposing types of religious belief that tend to alternate over the course of time. In the essay, Hume says that superstition arises from fear. Primitive peoples try to understand the threatening forces in the world, and they explain them as the work of dangerous invisible powers that need to be propitiated. Enthusiasm, by contrast, is the opposite of fear. It reflects a presumptuous confidence that individuals have personal access to divine inspiration.
- Gibbon also found helpful a further corollary in Hume's essay: Superstition is favorable to priesthood, because a professional body of clergy takes on the role of propitiating the angry spirits. The priests then use their authority to control their followers. Contrariwise, enthusiasm generally rebels against priestly control, which is exactly what the Puritans had done in the 17th century.
- On the whole, Gibbon is favorable to ancient paganism, which he sees as providing social solidarity without any urge to dominate and persecute. The Romans tolerated widely differing beliefs from all over the ancient world, and when they did persecute Christians, it was for refusing to accept the rights of other faiths besides their own. Once Christianity gained power, its leaders became persecutors themselves, and their victims were often other Christians whose so-called heresies they condemned.
- Gibbon admired the intellectual gifts of the great theologians of the Church, but he thought those gifts were seriously misapplied. He agreed with Hume that theology was a cover—or rationalization—for social and political control. As Gibbon traces the history of Christianity,

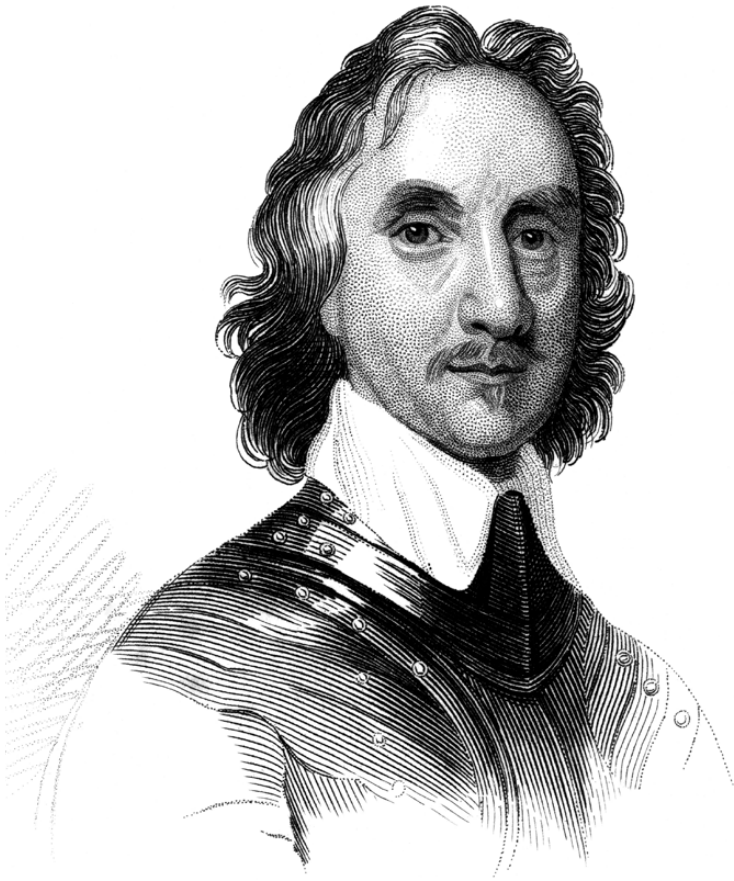
Hume's alternation between superstition and enthusiasm will be invoked again and again.

French Philosophes and British Perspectives

- Intellectuals in France, far more than in Britain, had personal experience of institutional religion as thought control. The Catholic Church had a monopoly on education from childhood onward. Indeed, two of the greatest philosophes—Voltaire and Diderot—were educated by the Jesuits. The Church also had the power of censorship, so that every book published in France had to omit whatever the censor disapproved of.
- Britain was more tolerant than France of multiple religious denominations. Voltaire, who lived in England for a while, greatly admired that. One could say that the process of secularization was much more advanced in Britain than in France. Hume often commented that by his time, religion was compartmentalized as something people did on Sunday, with very little influence on their actual lives.
- When Gibbon visited Paris and spent some time with the French philosophes, they regarded him as a coward because he didn't despise organized religion as wholeheartedly as they did. In truth, Gibbon was a consistent skeptic, just as Hume was. Gibbon was disgusted by what he called the philosophes' "intolerant zeal." As he says in his *Memoirs*:

Nor could I approve the intolerant zeal of the French philosophers. They laughed at the skepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt.

- Both Hume and Gibbon thought that the Church of England and its Presbyterian counterpart in Scotland were important supports of social order. They were, as Hume and Gibbon saw it, "superstition" at its best.



Oliver Cromwell
(1599—1658)

- As for “enthusiasm,” its effects were paradoxical. Individually, people who claimed personal inspiration tended to disrupt social order. And because they were certain they had a mandate from heaven, they became tyrants once they gained power. Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, for example, was effectively a dictator. In Hume’s *History of England*, the period of Puritan rule represents a grave warning against letting religious “enthusiasm” run amok.

Suggested Reading

Damrosch, *Fictions of Reality in the Age of Hume and Johnson*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. To what extent do the assumptions of empiricism still influence thought today?
2. In your experience, how do most people now regard accounts of miracles?
3. Does Hume's distinction between "superstition" and "enthusiasm" still seem useful?



LECTURE 9

The Rise of Christianity

In chapters 15–16 of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon treats the history of the Church as simply one historical phenomenon among many. Dismissing arguments based on divine providence, Gibbon argues that five secondary causes are sufficient to explain why Christianity succeeded: the proselytizing zeal of the early Christians, early Christian morality, the promise of a future life in heaven, the appeal to miracles, and Christians' organization as an independent body within the larger society.

Proselytizing Zeal

- All sorts of religions were practiced within the Roman Empire, but they didn't claim that they possessed exclusive truth. Each ethnic group honored special gods of its own—as did the Jews, who worshipped the God that had made them his Chosen People.
- Christianity took over from Judaism the concept of a single God who created the whole universe out of nothing. None of the pagan religions believed in that. But when Christianity developed on its own, it became something very different from its Judaic origins. The crucial point, Gibbon says, is this: “The Jews were a nation; the Christians were a sect.”
- So long as the Jews didn't try to stamp out pagan practices or demand that everybody else convert to their faith, the Romans had no problem with them. When the Romans did crack down on the Jews, it was for political rebellion. Just to drive the point home, they gave Israel the new administrative name of Palestine.
- What made Christianity different was that it claimed to be universal. You didn't need to be born a Christian; everyone everywhere was encouraged to be baptized.
- This new faith had a profound sense of missionary duty, regarding other faiths not just as different, but as fatally mistaken. Gibbon calls it zealous because it proselytized with such conviction, and he calls it intolerant because it refused to live and let live as other religions did.

Christian Morality

- Pagans were very much concerned with right conduct, but they thought of morality as an ongoing, lifelong project in which one should strive to live up to one's responsibilities as a spouse and a citizen. Christianity offered something new: total, overwhelming transformation by divine grace. After conversion, a person was born again.



- Gibbon acknowledges that many converts were attracted by what he calls the “pure and austere morals” of the early Christians. But with his epicurean philosophy of enjoying the good things of life, he believed it went much too far. In particular, he despises the cult of virginity, which Christians treated as the noblest way of life, and the contempt for natural instinct that it entailed.
- There was an imaginative myopia toward religious experience shared by the Enlightenment philosophes, and that myopia seriously



damages Gibbon's analysis in these chapters. There were currents of feeling in the ancient world that he barely tried to understand, and the cult of virginity was one of them.

- The great historian Peter Brown makes a convincing argument in his book *The Body and Society*. Brown shows that ancient culture in general—not just Christianity—associated control of bodily impulses with wisdom and integrity. Although most pagans didn't glorify virginity, many of them did believe that marriage was a real handicap, embedding people in a complicated network of relationships and obligations: family, property, inheritance, and so on. From this point of view, Christian self-denial could have a wide appeal.
- It should be stressed, however, that Gibbon does not despise Christianity itself. When he tells us that the faith of the early Church was “pure,” he is not using the word ironically. He respects a genuine simplicity and sincerity in the earliest believers. As for Jesus, Gibbon admires him deeply. In chapter 16, he speaks of “his mild constancy in the midst of cruel and voluntary sufferings, his universal benevolence, and the sublime simplicity of his actions and character.”
- What Gibbon does not believe is that Jesus was literally the Son of God, incarnated in human form. Instead, he thinks of Jesus as a great teacher who was later redefined as the second person of the Holy Trinity through philosophical concepts that he himself never used. The consequences of that turn to theology receive close attention throughout the *Decline and Fall*.

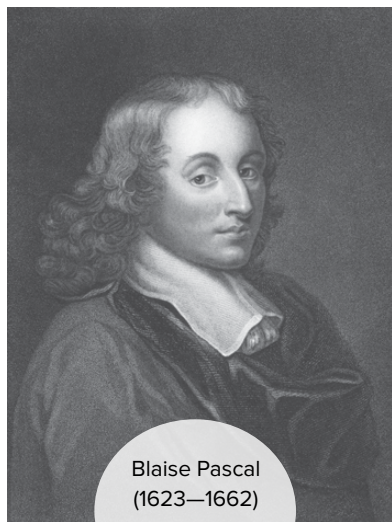
Eternal Life

- Christians had something else that was novel: the promise of eternal life. Humble though a person might be in the present world, this world was destined to perish—very soon, it was thought. And in heaven, all men and women would be equal.

- “It is no wonder,” Gibbon says, “that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the Roman Empire.” Peter Brown agrees: By claiming privileged access to the other world, Brown notes, the Church paradoxically gained power in this one.
- On the subject of immortality, however, Gibbon drops in a curveball. He comments that immortality was taught in India, in Egypt, and even in Gaul. So how is it that the writers of the Old Testament seem to have known nothing about it? As Gibbon puts it:

We might naturally expect that a principle so essential to religion would have been revealed in the clearest terms to the chosen people of Palestine. It is incumbent on us to adore the mysterious dispensations of Providence, when we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted in the Law of Moses. The hopes as well as fears of the Jews appear to have been confined within the narrow compass of the present life.

- This is an example of Gibbon’s famous irony. He tells us with a straight face that we must adore the “mysterious dispensations of Providence,” but he obviously believes no such thing.
- In his *Memoirs*, Gibbon mentions that he loved the *Provincial Letters* of Blaise Pascal. He says appreciatively that he learned from Pascal “to manage the weapon of grave and temperate irony, even on subjects of ecclesiastical solemnity.” Pascal was a member of the Jansenist faction in the Catholic Church, and his biting irony was directed against their rivals, the Jesuits. Gibbon



Blaise Pascal
(1623—1662)

borrowed Pascal's irony to attack not a party within the Church, but the very basis of religion itself.

The Appeal to Miracles

- On the subject of miracles, Gibbon is still more devastatingly ironic. He doesn't say much about the miracles that supposedly happened after the time of Christ—Hume had already demolished those—but he does make one telling comment in a footnote. Vast numbers of miracles were ascribed to the early saints. Some of those saints left extensive writings of their own, however, and not one of them ever mentioned a miracle performed by himself. To a historian, this is pretty convincing evidence that those miracles never happened.
- What Gibbon goes after is still more provocative: He calls into question the miracles in the Bible. He describes the wonders the ancient Jews supposedly witnessed and emphasizes their strange failure to take them seriously:

When the law was given in thunder from Mount Sinai; when the tides of the ocean and the course of the planets were suspended for the convenience of the Israelites; and when temporal rewards and punishments were the immediate consequences of their piety or disobedience, they perpetually relapsed into rebellion against the visible majesty of their Divine King, placed the idols of the nations in the sanctuary of Jehovah, and imitated every fantastic ceremony that was practiced in the tents of the Arabs, or in the cities of Phoenicia.

- Gibbon's robustly structured style makes the irony all the more telling. How likely is it that the Chosen People would see the solar system redirected for their own advantage and the Red Sea miraculously part and then forget all about it?
- Equally striking is a comment at the end of chapter 15. According to the Gospels, when Christ was crucified, the heavens were darkened

for a space of three hours. In a footnote, Gibbon observes that many Christian writers added that the darkness covered the entire world. Yet there were pagans at the time who carefully recorded every earthquake and comet and eclipse. Why on earth did they ignore this? “They omitted to mention,” Gibbon says, “the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe.”

- Most modern theologians would not find this criticism meaningful. They would say that the Gospel writers were describing a symbolic event, not something that literally happened. But Gibbon’s contemporaries needed all of the miracles to be literal. They were crucial evidence for the divine mandate of the Church.

Organization and Discipline

- Gibbon regards the organization and discipline of the Church as the most significant of the five secondary causes. In the early Church, a bureaucratic structure of bishops and priests developed to govern in a top-down hierarchy. The Bishop of Rome gained primacy as the Pope. Papal primacy was never accepted in the East, where the Orthodox Church evolved in opposition to it, but that will be taken up in later chapters of the *Decline and Fall*.
- Pagan worship in Rome had priests to conduct its festivals, but they were not a special priestly caste. They were simply distinguished members of the community carrying out one of their social responsibilities.
- The Christian clergy did much good, Gibbon acknowledges. Their practice of charity to the poor and needy—something paganism never even tried—was remarkable, and it was undoubtedly a factor in their success. All the same, Gibbon says, they succumbed to that all too familiar human characteristic: “the love of power.”
- In addition to miracles, spokesmen for Christianity pointed to the religion’s survival in spite of horrific persecution. That survival would have been impossible, they argued, without direct divine support.

Here Gibbon is on firm ground. He shows convincingly that the persecutions were intermittent, not continuous, and that there were far fewer victims than Christian writers later claimed.

Modern Perspectives

- Gibbon's take on the alleged evidence for miracles and the limited nature of persecutions is generally confirmed by historians today. What is missing in his account, however, is imaginative empathy with people's emotional needs—that is, their inner lives. Like Voltaire and Hume, Gibbon saw religion very much from the outside.
- In the 1960s, an Oxford professor of Greek, E. R. Dodds, published a groundbreaking book titled *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*. Dodds highlighted the turbulent experience of life that most people endured during the centuries that Gibbon views with comfortable detachment. This is how Dodds begins:

When Marcus Aurelius came to the throne, no bell rang to warn the world that the *pax Romana* was about to end and be succeeded by an age of barbarian invasions, bloody civil wars, recurrent epidemics, galloping inflation, and extreme personal insecurity.

Gibbon knows about those scary occurrences, but he doesn't really consider how they affected the feelings of people at the time.

- In his account of paganism, Gibbon idealizes mild communal celebrations of weddings and funerals and the convivial pouring of libations at friendly banquets. In so doing, he largely ignores a very different form of paganism: the mystery religions that originated in the East and spread like wildfire through the ancient world. These claimed special access to a realm of reality altogether different from the world we live in, and they offered their followers a means of breaking through to that realm.

- None of these mystery religions were centered in a single locality, as the earlier forms of paganism had been. At a time when community in the traditional sense was breaking down, they offered a new kind of universal community. They also offered an exhilarating promise of personal transformation. Christianity can thus be seen as doing something very similar to the mystery religions, while claiming that they were diabolical and that it alone possessed the true path to salvation.
- The Christian identification of the pagan gods with devils likewise responded to widespread anxieties at the time. Most people in those days believed that the world was teeming with evil spirits, and that it was common for those evil spirits to invade individuals. Casting out devils was a regular achievement of holy men in many faiths, not just Christianity.
- Miracles were also thought to be common. Pagan critics of Christianity didn't take a skeptical stance toward all miracles, the way Hume and Gibbon would. They freely granted that such events occurred all the time. Pagan critics even took for granted that Christian miracles did take place, but claimed that they were the result of black magic.
- In Christian teaching, heaven is our ultimate destination, but this world is the scene of a crucial story—a story that makes sense of the whole of history. Many religions featured a god who died and rose again. The dying god of other religions, however, was a purely symbolic figure whose resurrection was repeated in an endless cycle. By contrast, Christ died at a specific moment, in an actual place. His resurrection after he was crucified was likewise understood to be a historical fact. This embedding of religion in history was an immense attraction.
- Gibbon was well aware that his chapters on Christianity were likely to provoke criticism, but when it came, he was genuinely surprised at its ferocity. His French translator noted with regret that it was impossible even to publish those chapters in France, where censorship would never permit them; they were simply omitted from the French edition of the *Decline and Fall*.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Body and Society*.

———, *The World of Late Antiquity*.

Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you find Gibbon's ironies about early Christianity rhetorically effective, or are they (as his critics charged) insidious sneers?
2. How convincing are Gibbon's five secondary causes in accounting for the rise of Christianity?
3. Do modern perspectives on the religious milieu of the early centuries supplement Gibbon's interpretation or throw doubt upon it?



Constantine and Athanasius

Chapter 17 marks a major turning point in the *Decline and Fall*. In chapters 17–21, Gibbon describes the emperor Constantine’s establishment of a new capital at Constantinople, which would permanently move the Empire’s center of gravity, and his establishment of Christianity as the official state religion. This lecture examines Gibbon’s account of this radically new story.

The Empire under Constantine

- Constantinople was an exotic city. Although Gibbon never visited the city, he describes Constantinople in such rich detail that you would swear he had lived there.
- Constantine chose an exceptional site for the new capital, on the western shore of the Bosphorus. The city was situated on major trade routes, both by land and by sea. The city's harbor was known as the Golden Horn because of the curved shape of the shoreline, but also, Gibbon says, because "the epithet of golden was expressive of the riches which every wind wafted from the most distant countries into the secure and capacious port of Constantinople."
- From Gibbon's point of view, the Roman Empire was now ruled by an oriental despotism and no longer even paid lip service to the pretense that the emperor carried out the wishes of the Senate. Constantine himself was a man of the East. His father had been an army officer in the Balkans, and his own career began at the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia, in Asia Minor. After his victory in 312, Constantine visited Rome only one more time in his life.
- During this period, the distinction between citizens inside the Empire and barbarians outside became increasingly blurred. Many former barbarians had settled down comfortably inside the Empire, and the Empire needed them. The only way to keep the enormous army fully manned was to recruit barbarian soldiers with a promise of good pay and gifts of land when their service was finished.
- To Gibbon, the term "oriental" implied not just despotism, but also an emphasis on flashy image rather than substance. Although Constantine began life as a tough army officer, Gibbon states that he eventually became a complacent autocrat surrounded by sycophants and was increasingly petty and paranoid.

- From a political point of view, the degenerate ethos of Constantine's court was bound to infect his administration, which had started out so promisingly. As Gibbon describes it,

Constantine's unworthy favorites, enriched by the boundless liberality of their master, usurped with impunity the privilege of rapine and corruption. A secret but universal decay was felt in every part of the public administration.

- Modern historians have had various reactions to this negative attitude of Gibbon's. Whether or not the Eastern Roman Empire was "decaying," however, it still outlasted the Western Roman Empire by 1,000 years.

Constantine's Conversion to Christianity

- By chapter 20, Gibbon is ready to address two big questions: Why did Constantine convert to Christianity and make it the official state religion? And did why furious theological debate immediately erupt and become a major factor in public life?
- As to why Constantine established Christianity, most people in Gibbon's day would have thought the answer was obvious. Samuel Johnson explained it like this: "The hour came at length when after three hundred years of struggle and distress, truth took possession of imperial power."
- As to why theological debate got so intense, people like Johnson would regard that as obvious too: Human beings have an obligation to interpret and teach the truth as well as they can, but because people are fallible, disagreements are bound to arise.
- Gibbon would not have been impressed with either of those answers. As with his earlier account of the rise of Christianity, he approaches these questions from the perspective of a secular historian.

- It's not even clear that Constantine ever had a conversion experience. But later writers very much wanted to believe that there was a decisive conversion, and they attributed it to a vision that Constantine and his soldiers supposedly witnessed just before a crucial victory in 312.
- As a bishop named Eusebius reports it, when Constantine and his troops were approaching Rome, there appeared in the sky a luminous cross, and a voice was heard to cry out: "In this sign you shall conquer." Eusebius gives the words in Greek, but in their Latin form—*in hoc signo vinces*—they became a central feature of Christian tradition. All of the soldiers saw this phenomenon, and they went into battle certain that God was on their side.
- Gibbon was skeptical of miracles, and this one is no exception. He tells us, "The real or imaginary cause of so important an event deserves and demands the attention of posterity," and he promises to separate "the historical, the natural, and the marvelous parts of this extraordinary story, which, in the composition of a specious argument, have been artfully confounded in one splendid and brittle mass."
- Might Constantine have made it all up? Gibbon considers that possibility. He notes that there must have been many people still living whom Eusebius could have interviewed, but instead of getting their testimony, he relied simply on what Constantine himself had said. Gibbon notes also that other religious writers in the 4th and 5th centuries, who evidently had not seen Eusebius's biography, made no mention whatsoever of the wonderful vision—which was supposedly witnessed by an entire army.
- Yet Gibbon is willing, at least, to conclude that Constantine believed he was telling the truth. Whatever he saw—or thought he saw—he probably did feel certain that he had been given a special sign from God.

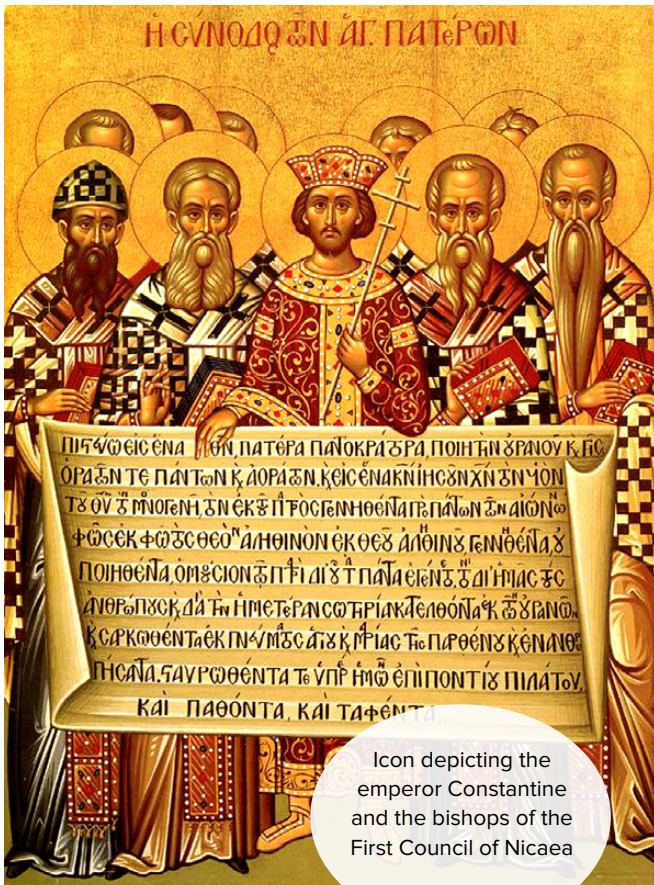


Arch of
Constantine

- Gibbon notes also that Constantine waited to be baptized until he was on his deathbed, which he thought suspicious. Modern historians tell us, however, that the practice was far from uncommon. People knew that they were likely to go on committing sins after baptism, and they feared that they would endanger their salvation. By getting baptized at the last possible moment, they hoped to guarantee their welcome in Heaven.
- Whatever Constantine's vision may have been like, historians today tend to doubt, just as Gibbon did, that he experienced an overwhelming conversion in 312. His commitment seems to have evolved only gradually, which is exactly what Gibbon says:
- The nicest accuracy is required in tracing the slow and almost imperceptible gradations by which the monarch declared himself the protector, and at length the proselyte, of the Church.
- If Constantine wasn't a fervent believer from the beginning, why would he install Christianity as the official religion of the Empire? To Gibbon the answer was obvious: A state religion could be a valuable ally for political absolutism. And unlike the old paganism, Christianity taught obedience to authority as a moral duty, together with patient acceptance of suffering in this vale of tears.
- Whatever Constantine's motives may have been, his conversion was truly a turning point in history. The consequence of this change was to drastically alter the relationship of power between church and state. Peter Brown puts it succinctly: "From being a sect ranged against Roman civilization, Christianity became a church prepared to absorb a whole society."
- This transformation didn't happen all at once; it wasn't complete until the reign of Theodosius I, 40 years after Constantine. But right from the start, Gibbon notes, bishops enjoyed legal as well as spiritual jurisdiction. There were no fewer than 1,800 bishops in the Empire.

The First Council of Nicaea

- In 325, just one year after Constantine achieved unchallenged power, he convened a great council of bishops at Nicaea, not far from Constantinople. This became known as the First Council of Nicaea.
- Constantine presided over the council personally and took an active part in the debates. With his military background, it's not clear how fully he understood the theological issues. What he did understand,



however, was that there was a lot of destructive quarreling about Christian doctrine, and he wanted it to stop.

- Pagan religions didn't have theology, just communal practices. With Christianity, there was an insistence on specific verbal formulas that one had to accept in order to be a member of the Church. But during the first two centuries, even the Bible was a far from settled document. Agreeing on a fixed canon of biblical books—and a stable set of doctrines—would be an immense advantage for the Church.
- The First Council of Nicaea produced the Nicene Creed, which became standard in the Catholic Church and eventually in some Protestant ones as well. But it was by no means unchallenged, then or later. Further councils went on trying to clarify and refine its meaning, and there were aggressive breakaway groups that refused to accept it at all. Those groups were denounced as heretics, and they were eventually stamped out. All we know about them comes from brief quotations—probably chosen unfairly—in the writings of the victors.
- Gibbon himself believed hardly a word of the Nicene Creed, if he even believed that much. As a boy, he had enjoyed exploring theological controversies as a kind of intellectual game, and now he tackled them again with energy and skill. He once remarked that he understood the meaning of the words modern churchgoers recited much better than they did themselves.
- The debate at Nicaea was complex and abstruse. Notable outgrowths include the doctrine of the Trinity and the idea that Jesus was of one substance with God the Father. As translated in the Book of Common Prayer, authorized in 1662 by the Church of England, the Nicene Creed describes Christ as “begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”
- That expression, “one substance,” was the crux at Nicaea. A rival strain of Christianity, known as Arianism, asserted that Jesus was

created by God the Father and therefore subordinate the Father, not fully divine. The bishops at Nicaea rejected that interpretation. In the creed they produced, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were consubstantial, somehow sharing a single substance.

- Far from putting an end to debate, the Council of Nicaea only stimulated debate. In later years, a series of further councils would continue struggling to get everything nailed down. With obvious sarcasm, Gibbon says, in the last words of chapter 20:

The progress of time and superstition erased the memory of the weakness, the passion, and the ignorance, which disgraced these ecclesiastical synods; and the Catholic world has unanimously submitted to the infallible decrees of the general councils.

Athanasius

- Whole national groups would continue to espouse Arianism in the ancient world—not necessarily because of philosophical conviction, but as a convenient weapon against the orthodox Trinitarians of the East.
- The champion of the Trinitarians was Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria in Egypt. Gibbon devotes nearly 50 pages to Athanasius, and his account is highly positive. Gibbon respects the archbishop's heroic sincerity and is deeply impressed by his leadership abilities. It would be hard to imagine warmer praise than this:

We have seldom an opportunity of observing, either in active or speculative life, what effect may be produced, or what obstacles may be surmounted, by the force of a single mind when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object. The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, to whose defense he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being.

- The Arians occasionally got the upper hand, and Athanasius endured long periods in exile. But he never gave in. Gibbon pays the archbishop the highest compliment possible—according to his own values—by concluding that Athanasius would have made a superb emperor.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*.

Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Questions to Consider

1. Are those historians convincing who say that if Constantine had not converted to Christianity, the course of history might have been drastically different?
2. How does the insistence of Christianity on specific propositions, as stated in the various creeds, differ from the assumptions of other world religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism?



LECTURE 11

Julian and the Return to Paganism

After his account of Constantine and the rise of Christianity, Gibbon has a very different story to tell in chapters 22–24 of the *Decline and Fall*. Covering a period of less than two years, this is the story of the emperor Julian—known to posterity as Julian the Apostate—who unsuccessfully attempted to reinstate the old religion of the Olympian gods.

Julian's Early Life

- Julian's father was a half brother of the great Constantine. Julian was thus Constantine's nephew. When Constantine died in 337, he left directions that his three sons—and three nephews—should all share power. Immediately, however, the army declared that it would only accept the sons of Constantine, not their cousins.
- Constantine's sons struggled for supremacy. After Constantius won out, he carried out a purge in which Julian's father and eight other relatives were killed. Julian himself was only six years old at the time, and probably spared only because he was so young.
- Julian was raised thereafter under the supervision of the bishop Eusebius. At this early stage, Julian was still a Christian, but he also read the pagan classics with enthusiasm. Naturally, he kept quiet about it. He later went to Athens to study Greek philosophy.
- When he grew up, Julian was expected to take a role in public affairs, and he did so reluctantly. In Gaul, he served as the chief representative of the emperor—with the title of Caesar of the West—when he was just 24 years old. Perhaps surprisingly, he turned out to be an able general and administrator. Gibbon calls him “the young hero who supported in Gaul the throne of Constantius.”
- Julian's troops adored him. That aroused the hatred of Constantius, who ordered him to come home. In 361, however, Julian's soldiers acclaimed him emperor and demanded that he march with them to seize the throne. Julian insisted that he didn't want to accept, but the soldiers refused to be denied. Gibbon's estimate of what Julian's feelings may have been is nicely judged:

The grief of Julian could proceed only from his innocence; but his innocence must appear extremely doubtful in the eyes of those who have learned to suspect the motives and the professions of princes. His lively and active mind was susceptible of the various impressions of hope and fear, of gratitude and revenge, of duty



Constantine the Great
(c. 280 C.E.—337 C.E.)

and ambition, of the love of fame and the fear of reproach. But it is impossible for us to calculate the respective weight and operation of these sentiments; or to ascertain the principles of action which might escape the observation while they guided, or rather impelled, the steps of Julian himself.

- Julian set out for Constantinople with his army. Constantius got scared and sent an ambassador with a letter to urge Julian to back off. The letter reminded Julian of his privileged education and the fact that his life been preserved “when he was left a helpless orphan.” Understandably furious, Julian exclaimed, “Does the assassin of my family reproach me that I was left an orphan?”
- Julian continued his advance toward Constantinople. At the same time, he took another momentous step: He came out as a pagan. As Gibbon relates it,

He made a public declaration that he committed the care of his safety to the Immortal Gods; and thus publicly renounced the religion, as well as the friendship, of Constantius.

- Constantius died unexpectedly, and the anticipated battle never happened. Julian was now unchallenged as emperor—the last representative of the family of Constantine. He now saw before him the possibility of short-circuiting the still-recent triumph of Christianity.

Julian as Emperor

- As Julian settled into his new role, it became clear that he was a strange and prickly character. He took his responsibilities extremely seriously and prided himself on carrying them out with selfless integrity. In one of Gibbon’s deft summaries:

He despised the honors, renounced the pleasures, and discharged with incessant diligence the duties of his exalted station.

- Julian worked around the clock, ate the most frugal diet possible, and slept on the floor. These were not just private observances; he got rid of most of the palace servants and eunuchs and made it clear that he wanted the entire nation to reform along with him. As far as anyone was able to tell, Julian was totally asexual—completely without attraction to either sex. Gibbon gives a contemptuous account:

The splendid and effeminate dress of the Asiatics, the curls and paint, the collars and bracelets, which had appeared so ridiculous in the person of Constantine, were consistently rejected by his philosophic successor. But with the fopperies, Julian affected to renounce the decencies of dress; and seemed to value himself for his neglect of the laws of cleanliness.

- As Gibbon sees it, Julian was putting on an act—just as Constantine had—although in Julian’s case he was ostentatious about refusing ostentation. Underneath the philosophical righteousness was tremendous vanity, and as the account continues, Gibbon foregrounds that vanity as a key to Julian’s character.
- Julian was especially sensitive about his scraggly beard, which back in Gaul had been unkindly compared to a goat’s, and he addressed the subject defiantly in a work called *Misopogon* (“Beard Hater”). Gibbon seizes on this document with relish:

In a satirical performance, which was designed for the public eye, the emperor descants with pleasure, and even with pride, on the length of his nails, and the inky blackness of his hands. He protests that although the greatest part of his body was covered with hair, the use of the razor was confined to his head alone; and he celebrates with visible complacency the shaggy and populous beard which he fondly cherished, after the example of the philosophers of Greece.

- To Gibbon, the giveaway is that Julian published his beard satire for public consumption. It would have been one thing if he had secretly slept on the floor and didn’t wash; it was another thing to publicize



it. Gibbon saw it as further evidence of Julian's vanity, and not the selflessness the emperor thought it was.

- Julian's vanity is a character flaw, but hardly a fatal one. It simply qualifies the image of superhuman virtue that his admirers promoted and that some 18th-century philosophes picked up on. Gibbon's chapter 22 ends with a generous tribute:

The generality of princes, if they were stripped of their purple and cast naked into the world, would immediately sink to the lowest rank of society, without a hope of emerging from their obscurity. But the personal merit of Julian was, in some measure, independent of his fortune. Whatever had been his choice of life, by the force of intrepid courage, lively wit, and intense application, he would have obtained, or at least he would have deserved, the highest honors of his profession. Even faction, and religious faction, was constrained to acknowledge the superiority of his genius in peace as well as in war; and to confess with a sigh that the apostate Julian was a lover of his country, and that he deserved the empire of the world.

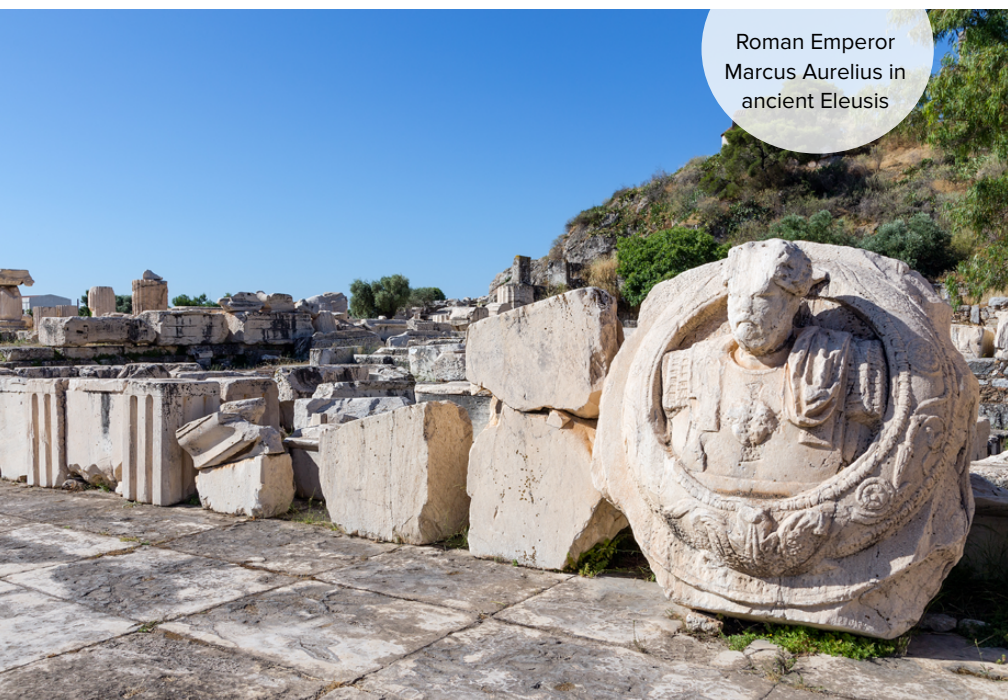
- Very soon, Julian's promise would be struck down by two factors. The first factor, according to Gibbon, is that Julian's dream of restoring paganism was doomed from the start. The second factor is that Julian wasn't content with trying to be a second Marcus Aurelius—he wanted to be a second Alexander the Great as well.

Julian and Paganism

- The one thing most readers would have known about Julian was his notorious apostasy. The reason the 18th-century philosophes idealized Julian was that they saw him as the perfect pagan alternative to Christianity.
- To Christian writers, it was a scandal that Julian ever espoused paganism at all. They decided that God must have allowed it for the

express purpose of demonstrating that even the greatest worldly power is impotent in the face of the true faith.

- Gibbon didn't agree with the Christian writers, but neither did he think that Julian was a perfect philosopher-emperor. Nor was he a philosophical Stoic, the way Marcus Aurelius had been. Julian's version of paganism was far more emotional—mystical, even.
- In Julian's day, Neoplatonism—the ideas of writers in Plato's tradition after his time—had ceased to be an abstract philosophy. It had developed an attraction to occult mysticism and secret rituals performed in deep caverns in the dead of night. It was less of a philosophy and more of a mystery religion.
- In his early twenties, when Julian was a student in Athens, he was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. The rituals were profoundly secret and are still not fully understood today. Modern scholars believe that psychedelic drugs may well have been involved.



Roman Emperor
Marcus Aurelius in
ancient Eleusis

- What Gibbon sees as especially unfortunate is that Julian wasn't putting on an act; his religious commitment was totally sincere. He regularly fasted, which may have led to certain visions he experienced. As Gibbon describes it:

By these voluntary fasts, he prepared his senses and his understanding for the frequent and familiar visits with which he was honored by the celestial powers. We learn from his faithful friend, the orator Libanius, that he lived in a perpetual intercourse with the gods and goddesses; that they descended upon earth to enjoy the conversation of their favorite hero; that they gently interrupted his slumbers by touching his hand or his hair; that they warned him of every impending danger, and conducted him, by their infallible wisdom, in every action of his life.

- In the old days, the common people regarded all gods as equally real, while philosophers regarded them as equally imaginary. Julian, however, was a self-styled philosopher who believed that the gods were not only real, but that they stroked his hair at night and told him what to do. And what they told him is that he had a sacred duty to impose the old beliefs on everyone else.
- Julian's attempt to reestablish the old religion was doomed to fail. There were many different strands of belief that Christian writers liked to lump together as "paganism," but they really didn't add up to an "ism" at all. The Christians, by contrast, had an impressively coherent set of beliefs. In addition, Christians had developed a highly organized institution that knew how to fight to protect its gains. Gibbon makes the point crisply:

The genius and power of Julian were unequal to the enterprise of restoring a religion which was destitute of theological principles, of moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline; which rapidly hastened to decay and dissolution, and was not susceptible of any solid or consistent reformation.

- Modern historians believe that Julian himself was aware of this challenge, and that he actually planned to restructure paganism, turning it into an organization much like that of the Christian Church. But it was simply too late. A religion that was no longer deeply embedded in people's consciousness could not simply be restored by official command.

Julian Makes War

- Julian's military successes in Gaul had convinced him that he was invincible. The Persian empire, which had been quiescent for a while, was growing in power under Shapur II. Julian resolved to teach the Persians a lesson. In 363, he marched into Mesopotamia with a large army.
- The Romans scored some successes early on. Gibbon gives special attention to their successful defeat of a fortified city by tunneling into it from below. Calling it "an undistinguishing massacre," Gibbon notes that the city was literally erased from the face of the earth: "The fortifications were razed to the ground; and not a vestige was left, that the city of Maogamalcha had ever existed."
- The Persians were ready to negotiate a peace treaty, but Julian arrogantly refused. Shortly thereafter, he unwittingly led his forces into a trap, and they were brutally defeated. He himself received his death wound, as Gibbon relates:

A javelin, after razing the skin of his arm, transpierced the ribs and fixed in the inferior part of the liver. Julian attempted to draw the deadly weapon from his side; but his fingers were cut by the sharpness of the steel, and he fell senseless from his horse.

- With their backs to the wall, the soldiers acclaimed an officer named Jovian as the new emperor, and the Persians forced Jovian to accept a humiliating peace. Large territories that had been Roman for many

years were surrendered. For the first time ever, Gibbon adds, a Roman army was not only defeated, but allowed to trudge home in disgrace.

- In the larger perspective of the *Decline and Fall*, this episode represents something highly significant. Gibbon says: “This ignominious peace has justly been considered as a memorable era in the decline and fall of the Roman empire.”
- As for Julian, Gibbon rounds off his complex portrait in terms that highlight Julian’s unique gifts, but also his folly in throwing them away:

He called for a draft of cold water, and as soon as he had drunk it, expired without pain, about the hour of midnight. Such was the end of that extraordinary man, in the thirty-second year of his age, after a reign of one year and about eight months from the death of Constantius. In his last moments he displayed, perhaps with some ostentation, the love of virtue and of fame, which had been the ruling passions of his life.

Suggested Reading

Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does Gibbon make a convincing case that Julian was motivated by vanity, and that by the end he was showing signs of what would now be called megalomania?
2. Taking into account all the critical things that Gibbon says about Julian, does Gibbon show convincingly that Julian possessed extraordinary abilities that would have brought him distinction in any imaginable field?



LECTURE 12

Barbarian Advances and Theodosius

Chapters 25–28 of the *Decline and Fall* concern the period following the unexpected death of the emperor Julian. Gibbon describes it as a time of much confusion, during which control passed quickly from one ruler to the next. This lecture examines Gibbon's account of the increasing threats to the Roman Empire during this period and the reign of the emperor Theodosius.

Julian's Successors

- Julian's immediate successor, Jovian, turned out to be a very ordinary character. The Roman soldiers chose him hastily after Julian died in Mesopotamia. Although Jovian tried to present himself as a military hero, no one was taken in.
- Jovian did, however, attempt to cool the religious tension in the Empire. He declared himself a Christian, but promised that pagans could go on freely worshiping in their own way. After just eight months, however, Jovian was found dead in his bed—possibly poisoned, or possibly having consumed a grossly excessive quantity of mushrooms.
- Jovian's successor, Valentinian, was a much abler man who had fought with Julian in Gaul and was welcomed by the army after Jovian's death. To share responsibilities, Valentinian engaged his younger brother Valens as coruler.
- Valentinian was masterful and highly competent, but he had a strong temper and was quick to take offense. Gibbon gives a chilling account of the consequences:

In the government of his household, or of his empire, slight, or even imaginary offences; a hasty word, a casual omission, an involuntary delay; were chastised by a sentence of immediate death. The expressions which issued the most readily from the mouth of the emperor of the West, were "Strike off his head"; "Burn him alive"; "Let him be beaten with clubs till he expires."

- The one good thing Gibbon has to say about Valentinian is that he had no interest in theology. He carried on Jovian's policy of toleration for everyone, Christian or otherwise. There is also a more striking point: Despite Valentinian's arbitrary cruelty in specific instances, his administration was well managed on the whole. The bureaucracy was stable enough to keep itself going in spite of crazy behavior at the top.

Barbarian Threats

- The Empire at large was in trouble. There were barbarian threats—as usual, Gibbon lumps very different ethnic groups together as “barbarians”—pretty much everywhere. For the sake of clarity, Gibbon wisely abandons strict chronology and distributes the story into five separate geographical regions: Britain, Germany, the Danube, the Middle East, and North Africa. There were no decisive victories in these years, just renewed fighting in all theaters of war.
- During his reign of 12 years, Valentinian fought some truly savage battles along the Danube. In 375, in the Balkans, his life came to an end. Gibbon clearly sees it as poetic justice: The irascible temper that cost so many people their lives now cost Valentinian his own. When some ambassadors from a defeated tribe failed to meet his arrogant conditions, Valentinian flew into a rage:

His eyes, his voice, his color, his gestures expressed the violence of his ungoverned fury; and while his whole frame was agitated with convulsive passion, a large blood vessel suddenly burst in his body, and Valentinian fell speechless into the arms of his attendants.

- Valentinian's brother Valens was now the sole emperor. He faced ever-increasing pressure from the barbarians, especially from the Goths. As it turned out, however, Valens himself had only three more years to live.
- In this portion of his narrative, Gibbon discusses the Scythians (also known as Tartars), a nomadic people from central Asia. In the four-stage theory of cultural development that Gibbon accepted, the Scythians were stalled at the second stage, just one step above primitive hunter-gatherers. Gibbon even claims, paradoxically, that the Scythians' warlike ferocity was the result of laziness:

In every age, the immense plains of Scythia, or Tartary, have been inhabited by vagrant tribes of hunters and shepherds, whose

indolence refuses to cultivate the earth, and whose restless spirit disdains the confinement of a sedentary life.

- Gibbon expresses particular horror at the calmness with which the Scythians ate the very animals they had lived with and fed: “The bleeding limbs are served, with very little preparation, on the table of their unfeeling murderer.” It was no problem, of course, for Gibbon himself to sit down to a chicken or leg of lamb that he had not known personally, and that had been suitably cooked in a civilized way.
- Notwithstanding his fascination with the exotic, Gibbon never lost his prejudice in favor of European civilization. Herding animals over the vast Eurasian Steppe would hardly be a lifestyle for lazy people. And modern anthropology has taught us that nomads don’t just wander randomly, as Gibbon assumed. Their migrations were calculated and regular, a necessary response to the poor soil and limited rainfall of their homeland.
- Well aware that his narrative is filled with accounts of fighting, Gibbon pauses to compliment 18th-century Europe on having made warfare civilized:

The ordinary calamities of war are now moderated by the prudence or humanity of the princes of Europe, who amuse their own leisure, and exercise the courage of their subjects, in the practice of the military art. But the peaceful citizen has seldom reason to complain that his life, or even his fortune, is exposed to the rage of war.

- Here again, Gibbon’s complacency is remarkable. The Seven Years’ War had ended in 1763, and Voltaire’s *Candide*, which was written during that war, was full of outrage at the way politicians rationalized brutality and even atrocity. Voltaire mentions, for example, a town that was burned to the ground after the women had been raped and disemboweled, “in full accordance with the rules of international law.”

Chain Reactions

- Gibbon next provides an extended survey that carries us all the way to the Far East. The Asian tribes living closest to China, who seem to have overlapped with the Scythians, were known as the Mongols. As Gibbon notes, the Chinese held them at bay with the famous Great Wall of China, and the Mongols moved instead toward Europe.
- As happens repeatedly in the *Decline and Fall*, the movement of one barbarian group puts pressure on another. In this case, it was a Tartar group called the Huns, living farther west on the steppes, who responded by heading still farther westward, ahead of the Mongols.
- In 376, a huge company of Goths appeared at the Danube River. They demanded to be permitted to cross the river and settle down. The Goths had been forced out of their traditional grazing lands by the Huns, who were themselves fleeing from the Mongols. The emperor Valens feared that these new tribes of Goths were too powerful to defeat, so he allowed them to stay in Thrace, just north of Greece.
- Coexistence might have gone on peacefully, but the Romans foolishly broke promises they made to the Goths, and a series of terrible battles ensued. Gibbon describes the eyewitness account of the historian Ammianus, who visited a battlefield where thousands of dead soldiers had been left unburied:

Their flesh was greedily devoured by the birds of prey, who, in that age, enjoyed very frequent and delicious feasts; and several years afterwards the white and naked bones, which covered the wide extent of the fields, presented to the eyes of Ammianus a dreadful monument of the battle.

- Valens met his end in 378 at the Battle of Adrianople. The Roman army was surrounded and cut down, and Valens himself was wounded by an arrow. While his attendants tried to dress his wound in a humble cottage, the Goths set fire to it, and everyone inside burned to death.

- There was general confusion during the next few years. Valentinian's teenage son Gratian became emperor, but he was assassinated in 383. Gratian's coruler had been a provincial governor and general named Theodosius. Now, as Gibbon says, "the public safety seemed to depend on the life and abilities of a single man." Those are the suspenseful final words of Gibbon's second volume.

Theodosius

- In chapter 27, Gibbon tells the story of Theodosius, another truly impressive ruler who was nevertheless seriously flawed. Theodosius, Gibbon says, was chaste and temperate; he cultivated virtuous friends, not sycophantic favorites; "and the affability of his manners displayed the image of his mind." But the privilege of arbitrary rule could still produce appalling results.
- On one occasion, when there were riots in the city of Antioch, Theodosius issued a general pardon and freed some noblemen who had been imprisoned and tortured. Not long afterward, however, there was another riot in the city of Thessalonica. Ostensibly to calm things down, Theodosius invited everyone to a program of chariot races. Once the population had filled up the arena, they were systematically massacred.
- All over the Empire, pagan temples were torn down, apart from a few that were converted into Christian churches. Theodosius issued laws stipulating that anyone caught worshiping the old gods should be put to death. His sons and grandsons would go on enforcing these laws, Gibbon says, "with the loud and unanimous applause of the Christian world."
- At this point, Christianity was no longer competing for supremacy; it had fully achieved it. And from now on, wealth that had once gone into public structures like baths and stadiums went instead to establish huge churches filled with dazzling mosaics.



Base of the
Obelisk of
Theodosius

- In addition to intervening in religion, Theodosius conducted energetic military campaigns. Gibbon doesn't give them much attention, however, remarking that accounts of the campaigns are too hard to follow.
- One of Theodosius's goals was to reassert authority over North Africa, which prompts Gibbon to comment disparagingly about the hinterland beyond the agricultural regions on the shores of the Mediterranean: "The tedious enumeration of the unknown and uninteresting tribes of Africa may be reduced to the general remark that they were all of the swarthy race of the Moors."
- If the African tribes had been warlike, like the Goths and the Huns, they would have entered Gibbon's story. But because they weren't, Gibbon believes that they are not worth knowing about. Gibbon was not especially racist for his time, but his comment here definitely is:

Their rude ignorance has never invented any effectual weapons of defense or of destruction; they appear incapable of forming any extensive plans of government, or conquest; and the obvious inferiority of their mental faculties has been discovered and abused by the nations of the temperate zone.

- It's quite possible that Gibbon never personally knew any black people at all. Gibbon did strongly oppose slavery, however, saying in the same passage in the *Decline and Fall* that slavery “accuses the guilt of Europe.”

Suggested Reading

Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*.

Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does the Enlightenment theory of stages of civilization—“savage,” pastoral, agricultural, and commercial—still have merit today?
2. How complacent (or shortsighted) is Gibbon’s conviction that warfare had become civilized by his own time?
3. In saying very little about the Moorish peoples of North Africa, is Gibbon overlooking what a modern historian would consider important?



East and West Divided

“**T**he genius of Rome expired with Theodosius,” Gibbon wrote of the emperor’s death in Milan in 395. From that point forward, the once-great Empire would be permanently split into two separate units. This lecture examines chapters 29–33 of the *Decline and Fall*, in which Gibbon traces the consequences of that fragmentation.

A Fractured Empire

- Theodosius was succeeded by his two underage sons, Arcadius and Honorius. Both were completely feckless, confirming Gibbon's view that allowing rule to descend from father to son was often unfortunate. Nevertheless, Arcadius ruled the Eastern Roman Empire for 19 years, and Honorius ruled the Western Roman Empire for 30.
- In the East, the real ruler was a former advisor of Theodosius, a cynical manipulator named Rufinus. Rufinus easily gained control over the feeble Arcadius and was deeply feared by everyone. His influence ended, however, when the army of Flavius Stilicho, a powerful general, surrounded and killed Rufinus outside Constantinople.
- Stilicho then departed to put down a rebellion in North Africa. The rebellion represented a major threat, as North Africa was the principal source of grain for the Empire. Stilicho was a gifted administrator as well as commander. While the conflict in North Africa was in progress, he successfully averted famine by organizing the transport of great quantities of grain from Gaul.
- After Stilicho achieved victory, he was rewarded with the marriage of his daughter to the young emperor Honorius, who was still only 14 years old. When that daughter died nine years later, Honorius married a second daughter of Stilicho. Both marriages were probably disappointing, as Honorius is thought to have been impotent. By the time he died in 423, at the age of 39, Honorius's primary interest in life was feeding poultry.

The Sack of Rome

- Sensing a power vacuum when Theodosius died, a number of barbarian leaders saw their opportunity. The most notable of these was Alaric, king of the Visigoths. Greece surrendered to Alaric without resistance, and although Stilicho arrived with his army prepared for battle, the emperor Arcadius insisted on a peace treaty.



Visigothic
church

- The subsequent career of Alaric the Goth illustrates the fact that there was no longer a definite dividing line between barbarians and non-barbarians. Stilicho's father had been a Vandal in the service of the Empire, and Alaric likewise was entirely willing to become an ally of the Empire rather than an enemy.
- Very different was the haughty leader of still another group of Goths, who came down from distant northern forests: "The savage Radagaisus was a stranger to the manners, the religion, and even the language of the civilized nations of the South." This time Stilicho was allowed to fight. He trapped the attackers in a siege near Rome, during which they succumbed to starvation and disease. Gibbon mentions that Augustine attributed this "miraculous victory" entirely to divine providence.
- From the modern perspective, it is clear these were all temporary holding actions. Italy may have been saved for the time being, but to accomplish that, it was necessary to strip Gaul and Britain of their legions. A whole medley of tribes took advantage. They occupied Gaul in 407, and they were there to stay.

- Neither Rome nor Milan was safe anymore. The western court moved to Ravenna, on the Adriatic coast, which was surrounded by marshes that made attack nearly impossible. And as it turns out, Stilicho's alliance with Alaric was his undoing. The weak Honorius, prompted by yet another unscrupulous counselor, was encouraged to fear Stilicho as a rival and had him beheaded.
- The story gets hopelessly complicated at this point, even though Gibbon prunes and clarifies as much as he can. It was a time of endlessly shifting alliances, with the so-called "barbarians" as the principal soldiers in all the rival armies. At the fringes of the Empire, less assimilated barbarians were always threatening. Thrace and the Danube region had now been picked clean, and there was no point attacking Constantinople, safe behind its massive walls. Accordingly, Alaric headed for Rome.
- In 409, Alaric and his Gothic army besieged Rome and reduced it to near starvation. Ambassadors came out to capitulate to Alaric, but they warned him arrogantly that if the terms for peace were not satisfactory, they would still fight in enormous numbers. Laughing sarcastically, Alaric replied, "The thicker the hay, the easier it is mowed." He demanded a huge payment in gold and other valuables, which he received.
- Rome might then have been left in peace, but Roman leaders were foolish enough to break the terms of the treaty. This time, Alaric had had enough. In 410, he entered the city unopposed; the gates had been secretly opened by slaves and servants, who were glad he was there.
- The barbarians were in Rome to pillage for a week or so, not to stay, and they concentrated on collecting gold and jewels that could be easily carried off. This was the famous Sack of Rome, and a good deal of damage was done. As a Christian, however, Alaric ordered that the churches not be harmed. It had been eight centuries since barbarians had last sacked the city, and there was amazement and grief all over the Empire.
- After getting what they wanted out of Rome, the Goths moved on to the southern end of the Italian Peninsula, making themselves at

home in the opulent villas along the coast. Alaric's plan was to cross the Strait of Messina and conquer Sicily, but his premature death put an end to that ambition.

- Shocking though it was, the Sack of Rome left surprisingly few traces behind. "In less than seven years," Gibbon says, "the vestiges of the Gothic invasion were almost obliterated; and the city appeared to resume its former splendor and tranquility." But we have learned to watch out for ironic implications in a phrase like "appeared to resume." Immediately afterward, Gibbon emphasizes that this was "the last moment of her decay."
- A series of would-be usurpers emerged to try to replace the insignificant Honorius. There were seven of them in five years, but they all failed. Meanwhile, nearly all of the once-mighty Western Roman Empire had fallen to the various Germanic tribes.



The Byzantine Empire

- In chapter 32, Gibbon's narrative returns to Byzantium. It undoubtedly made sense to break up his story of these years into thematic sections, but that entails an unavoidable drawback: It can be extremely confusing to keep jumping backward and forward in time.

- At this stage in writing the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon was just not much interested in the Eastern Roman Empire, which later became known as the Byzantine Empire. It had been in Rome that Gibbon was first inspired to write his great book, and he didn't originally plan to carry the story beyond the end of the Western Roman Empire.
- Gibbon's underestimation of the Eastern Roman Empire is his biggest blind spot. Because the two halves of the Empire were already administratively separate, it's not actually clear that the final loss of the West would have seemed, in the East, like much of a loss at all. But Gibbon refuses to appreciate the extraordinary staying power of the Eastern Roman Empire, even in the face of repeated attacks by dangerous neighbors.
- Gibbon does acknowledge—grudgingly—that the Greek-speaking easterners “styled themselves, with some appearance of truth, the most enlightened and civilized portion of the human species.” But Gibbon is not primarily a cultural historian. His focus is on events—and in particular, events centered on emperors and generals.

Augustine Fights Donatism

- The most significant event in the early 5th century happened on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Led by their king Genseric—Gibbon calls him “the terrible Genseric”—the Vandals took possession of North Africa. Up until that time, as Gibbon says, so much wheat was exported every year “that Africa deserved the name of the common granary of Rome, and of mankind.” The loss of that grain was one more blow to the survival of the Western Roman Empire.
- Religious controversies surfaced yet again, though Gibbon gives them short shrift this time around. In North Africa, Augustine led a campaign to stamp out a heresy known as Donatism. The issue was in fact a crucial one, more so than Gibbon may grasp. Donatism was an attempt to return to the purity of early Christianity now that it had



Saint Augustine
(354–430)

spread beyond minority status and become a comfortable religion that everybody supposedly accepted.

- Augustine argued eloquently that there were many ways of being a Christian, and that it did not demand extraordinary purity on the part of every individual. Likewise, Augustine's denial of free will and his emphasis on predestination were intended to be consoling, not threatening.
- Augustine's opponent in this controversy was Pelagius, a monk from Britain who argued vehemently in favor of free will. Despite how it sounds, this was anything but encouraging. Pelagius was appalled, much more than Augustine was, by even the tiniest lapses into sin. He argued not only that Christians ought to behave better, but that because they had free will, they would be punished everlastingly if they failed.
- Augustine's position was far more generous: He comforted believers by telling them that even if they couldn't stop sinning, God's freely given grace could promise salvation. Each Christian was equal to every other, Augustine believed, because all were equally dependent on that grace.

Suggested Reading

Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does Gibbon's admiration for Stilicho reflect an excessive preoccupation with military greatness, as contrasted with other kinds?
2. Does the traditional image of the Sack of Rome turn out to be exaggerated?
3. Why does Gibbon have so little appreciation for the greatness of Saint Augustine?



LECTURE 14

Huns and Vandals

In chapter 34 of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon tells the story of a historical figure who has become a household name: Attila the Hun. In the chapters that follow, through chapter 38, Gibbon addresses—among other topics—the Vandalic assault on Rome, the official end of the Western Roman Empire in 476, and the rise of monasticism in Europe.

Attila the Hun

- Before the Huns arrived, groups invading the Western Roman Empire had been loose, shifting federations of tribes, occasionally organizing into a collaborative force, but more often quarreling among themselves. The Huns were something new, and they challenged the Roman Empire with a virtual empire of their own. “In the reign of Attila,” Gibbon says, “the Huns again became the terror of the world.” Gibbon introduces Attila with a vivid portrait:

A large head, a swarthy complexion, small, deep-seated eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short square body, of nervous strength, though of a disproportioned form. The haughty step and demeanor of the king of the Huns expressed the consciousness of his superiority above the rest of mankind; and he had a custom of fiercely rolling his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy the terror which he inspired.

Yet this savage hero was not inaccessible to pity: his suppliant enemies might confide in the assurance of peace or pardon; and Attila was considered by his subjects as a just and indulgent master. He delighted in war; but after he had ascended the throne in a mature age, his head, rather than his hand, achieved the conquest of the North; and the fame of an adventurous soldier was usefully exchanged for that of a prudent and successful general.

- Although the Huns first entered the consciousness of the Roman world in 376, it was not until 434 that the Hunnic Empire was consolidated under Attila. (As so often occurs, Gibbon doesn’t supply the dates that would help us to keep our bearings.) It’s conventional to call the Huns an empire, but a better word might be “hegemony.”
- The formerly nomadic Huns made their headquarters somewhere in upper Hungary, which takes its name from them. Their lifestyle was still rustic, with a palace made entirely of wood. Gibbon took it is

axiomatic that a proper palace is made of stone. He also remarks that over the extent of several thousand miles, the Hunnic Empire didn't contain a single city.

- In 450, Attila's soldiers were on the move. Their plan was to conquer Gaul with the assistance of some of the resident Vandals and Franks, who became their allies. Gibbon seems to treat this campaign as the result of mere belligerence, but there was a more calculated motive: The Hunnic Empire was unstable and could fragment at any time. Attila needed victories to keep it together. After the Huns had finished ransacking the region along the Danube, new targets had to be found.
- An impressive alliance of tribal groups in Gaul came together to resist the Huns, and you can hear Gibbon savoring their names as he gives a resonant roll call:

the Laeti, the Armoricans, the Breones, the Saxons, the Burgundians, the Sarmatians or Aláni, the Ripuarians, and the Franks. Such was the various army which, under the conduct of Aetius and Theódoric, advanced by rapid marches to relieve Orléans, and to give battle to the innumerable host of Attila.

- The opposing forces met in an enormous battle in 451 on the Catalaunian Plains, about 100 miles east of Paris. The historical record is very sketchy here, and it's not at all clear what happened, except that Theodoric was killed—not by a Hun, but by a javelin hurled by an Ostrogoth who was allied with Attila. After horrific bloodshed, the fighting ended in a stalemate, but Gaul was saved. Attila withdrew his forces and decided to attack Italy instead.
- In 452, the Huns captured Milan, which was duly sacked. At this point, Attila made an unusual proposal: He wanted to marry the Princess Honoria, the older sister of the emperor Valentinian III. While waiting for an answer concerning Honoria, however, Attila died from a burst artery. Gibbon describes with distaste how the Huns solemnly buried their ruler—executing a number of captives along with him—and then





Attila the Hun
(c. 406–453)

enjoyed a drunken celebration. Attila's sudden death marked the end of the Hunnic Empire.

The Vandals in Rome

- In chapter 36, Gibbon provides a survey of the development of the various barbarian kingdoms, which were not so barbaric anymore. He also narrates, as economically as possible, the depressing sequence of no fewer than nine Roman emperors during a space of just 20 years.
- During this period, an army of Vandals sacked Rome—which was getting sacked regularly by now—and a Vandalic naval force captured Sicily and North Africa. Thereafter, Vandalic pirate ships pillaged towns all over the Mediterranean. Back when the Empire was strong, piracy was suppressed ruthlessly.
- In 476, it was finally over. Romulus Augustulus, the last of the western emperors, resigned willingly, and the Senate informed the emperor in Constantinople that all that remained of the Western Roman Empire now belonged to him.
- Odoacer, whose ethnic origin is uncertain, was hailed as king—not emperor—and was generous enough to let Romulus Augustulus retire to a rural estate. Odoacer sent to Constantinople the diadem and purple cloak that only an emperor could wear. As Peter Heather says, “This momentous act brought half a millennium of empire to a close.”
- To those in the East, the “fall” of the Western Roman Empire in 476 was merely symbolic, as was the “momentous act” of turning over the imperial insignia. Gibbon’s headnote to the chapter dramatically announces the “total extinction of the Western Empire,” but in reality, all that changed was the administrative structure at the top.

- Insofar as there was a change, it was for the better. Odoacer was far more capable than the feeble emperors who preceded him. In Gibbon's words:

The king of Italy was not unworthy of the high station to which his valour and fortune had exalted him. His savage manners were polished by the habits of conversation; and he respected, though a conqueror and a barbarian, the institutions, and even the prejudices, of his subjects.

- From the Vandals' point of view, they had courageously won the right to settle down in some of the best regions in the former Empire. Over a span of 30 years, they had forced their way across France, into Spain, and now into North Africa. They weren't invaders any more, or even immigrants; they were simply inhabitants. Like the Goths before them, even when they carried valuables away from Rome, they didn't really damage the city itself.

The Rise of Monasticism

- In chapter 37, Gibbon returns once more to religion, and to the growth of a novel institution. That was monasticism, which originated in Egypt and spread throughout the West.
- Gibbon has a serious blind spot when it comes to monasticism. It is one that he shared with most Protestant English people, who regarded monks and nuns as agents of popish superstition and as idlers living at other people's expense. They were also appalled by the extreme self-mortification of the early monks.
- As early as the reign of Constantine, some devout ascetics had decided that society was unacceptably worldly, and they moved out altogether. The word "monk" comes from the Greek *mónachos* ("one who lives alone"). Some of them formed small communities in the wilderness—always of the same sex, of course—and others lived

completely alone as hermits. Gibbon's introduction of them sets the tone clearly:

The Ascetics, who obeyed and abused the rigid precepts of the Gospel, were inspired by the savage enthusiasm which represents man as a criminal and God as a tyrant. They seriously renounced the business and the pleasures of the age; abjured the use of wine, of flesh, and of marriage; chastised their body; mortified their affection; and embraced a life of misery, as the price of eternal happiness.

- Gibbon is always suspicious of fanatical “enthusiasm,” but he also criticizes the monks for its predictable opposite, “superstition.” A few pages later, he says, “These unhappy exiles from social life were impelled by the dark and implacable genius of superstition.” It’s not clear whether he means that they chose their vocation because they were already unhappy, or that they became unhappy afterward.
- Worst of all, from Gibbon’s point of view, these unproductive idlers had chosen a way of life that was virtually subhuman. “The lives of the primitive monks,” he says, “were consumed in penance and solitude, undisturbed by the various occupations which fill the time and exercise the faculties of reasonable, active, and social beings. At their silent meals, they were enveloped in their cowl; inaccessible, and almost invisible, to each other.”
- From a cultural perspective, it’s clear that Gibbon’s criticism of monasticism is badly off base. Most monks lived in communities, not alone, and they were expected to work hard as well as pray. In an economy built on slavery, there was high unemployment for free men, and entering a monastery offered a viable way of life. And both then and later, monasteries took up many of the public services that government was increasingly unable to perform.

Suggested Reading

Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.

Questions to Consider

1. How well has Gibbon's account of Attila the Hun clarified your understanding of that famous individual?
2. At this point in the story, how barbaric are the Vandal "barbarians"?
3. Is the resignation of the last Roman emperor in 476 a landmark event, or simply an acknowledgment of changes that had already taken place?
4. Is Gibbon's attitude toward monasticism so biased that he is unable to present it convincingly?



Theodoric and Justinian

The first three volumes of the *Decline and Fall* complete the story of the Western Roman Empire. Rather than end his narrative there, however, Gibbon shifts his focus to the East. In chapters 39–44, he introduces readers to a great general, two great emperors, and the classic codification of Roman law.

Theodoric

- Gibbon begins chapter 39 by giving a single paragraph to three emperors who reigned during a period of just over 50 years, from 474–527. After a brief, wide-angle shot of these irrelevant emperors, Gibbon narrows his focus to a single, memorable individual:

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, an interval of fifty years, till the memorable reign of Justinian, is faintly marked by the obscure names and imperfect annals of Zeno, Anastasius, and Justin, who successively ascended to the throne of Constantinople. During the same period, Italy revived and flourished under the government of a Gothic king, who might have deserved a statue among the best and bravest of the ancient Romans.

- Gibbon is speaking here of Theodoric. Born in the Danube province of Pannonia, Theodoric grew up in Constantinople, where he had been sent as a hostage. When he reached adulthood, he returned to the Ostrogoths and soon led them en masse to Italy.
- Upon reaching Italy, Theodoric won a series of battles against the Germanic leader Odoacer. In 493, Theodoric became king of Italy. After decades of disorder, he brought blessed tranquility to the Italian Peninsula. He resided at Ravenna, rather than Rome, and cultivated an orchard with his own hands. This is a rare instance, Gibbon says, “of a barbarian, who sheathed his sword in the pride of victory and the vigor of his age.”
- Theodoric is one of those exceptional figures for whom Gibbon has total admiration—apart from one notoriously cruel action. Theodoric issued a decree of death for the senator and philosopher Boethius, whom Theodoric suspected of conspiring to overthrow him. While awaiting execution, Boethius composed *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a profound guide to spiritual understanding that would become one of the most influential books of the Middle Ages.



Mausoleum of
Theodoric in
Ravenna

- After 33 years on the throne, Theodoric expired peacefully in Ravenna in the year 526. An impressive mausoleum was built to house his remains. The mausoleum still exists, although it was later converted into a church.

Justinian

- Justinian was one of those remarkable rulers who came up from nowhere. Born into a peasant family in Macedonia, he became the last native speaker of Latin to become emperor. He was adopted by his uncle Justin, who served in the imperial guard in Constantinople.
- In 518, Justin was proclaimed emperor. Justinian served as his uncle's close associate for a reign of nine years. When Justin died in 527, Justinian succeeded his uncle as emperor. Justinian's reign would last another 38 years.



- No sooner had Justinian become emperor than he raised his wife to a position of high influence, though as Gibbon says with ironic understatement, “Her strange elevation cannot be applauded as the triumph of female virtue.” The empress’s name was Theodora, and her scandalous early career was described in detail by Procopius in a gossip-filled work known as *The Secret History*.
- According to Procopius, Theodora had been a popular stage performer. She would lie down on her back on stage, slaves would sprinkle grain on her private parts, and trained geese would pick the grain off and eat it. Procopius adds that Theodora wished for an orifice between her breasts, to go with the other three that were constantly available to men.
- Surprisingly, Theodora not only won the affection of Justinian, she proved to be an able colleague in ruling the Empire. Although she could be tyrannical—she maintained a body of spies, and people who displeased her were jailed or killed—she was also a benefactor of the Church and deeply concerned with helping the poor and unfortunate.
- Justinian’s lasting legacy was the magnificent *Corpus Juris Civilis* (“Body of Civil Law”). This was an amazingly comprehensive rewriting of the mass of legislation—much of it contradictory—that had accumulated over the previous millennium.
- We may take it for granted today that a civilized nation must have a coherent legal code, but that was by no means usual in the ancient world. In most places, arbitrary rule was the norm. Establishing the law in written form was a protection against abuses by the rich and powerful. Gibbon devotes the entirety of chapter 44 to the Code of Justinian, and his admiration is wholehearted:

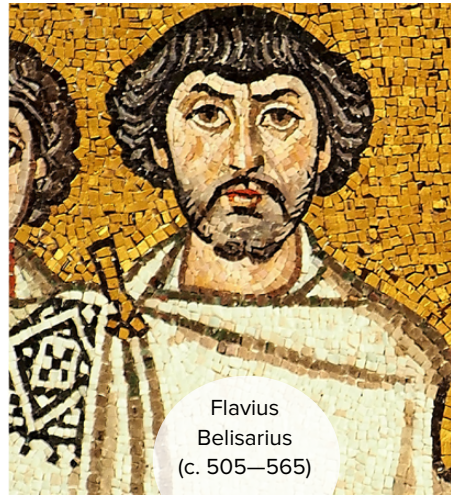
The name of the legislator [Justinian] is inscribed on a fair and everlasting monument. The public reason of the Romans has been silently or studiously transfused into the domestic institutions of Europe, and the laws of Justinian still command the respect or obedience of independent nations.



Belisarius

- In addition to consolidating power at home, Justinian was determined to win back large parts of the former Empire that had been stripped away. In this campaign, he collaborated with a great general: Flavius Belisarius.
- Like Justinian, Belisarius was born in the Balkans. He served in the imperial guard in Constantinople and soon rose to the rank of commander in chief of the army in the East. Gibbon calls him “one of those heroic names which are familiar to every age and to every nation.”
- The first target was North Africa. The goal was to win back the crucial agricultural region from the Vandals. According to Gibbon, that was easier than it might have been earlier because, “in three generations, prosperity and a warm climate had dissolved the hardy virtue of the Vandals, who insensibly became the most luxurious of mankind.” Gibbon always expresses contempt for effete pleasures, as if he himself were a hardened warrior.
- Belisarius’s fleet promptly conquered the historic city of Carthage. The defeated Vandal king, Gelimer, fled into the back country to hide out among the Moors. After Belisarius swore on his honor that Gelimer would not be harmed, Gelimer went to Constantinople, prostrated himself before Justinian and Theodora, and was allowed to retire with his family to a pleasant estate in Anatolia.
- After winning the Vandalic War, Belisarius achieved further victories—including the recapture of Rome—in a war against the Ostrogoth monarchy in Italy. His ability was shown at its most brilliant when the Goths counterattacked: “This perilous day,” Gibbon says, “was the most glorious in the life of Belisarius. Amidst tumult and dismay, the whole plan of the attack and defense was distinctly present to his mind; he observed the changes of each instant, weighed every possible advantage, transported his person to the scenes of danger, and communicated his spirit in calm and decisive orders.”

- Belisarius returned to Constantinople in 540. Just two years later, an unforeseeable disaster weakened the Empire more drastically than any human enemy could: an eruption of plague, which may well have been the first occurrence ever of bubonic plague. Justinian himself fell sick, though he was one of the small minority who recovered.



- Nobody back then had any idea how the plague was caused and spread, and the mortality rate was horrendous. Gibbon describes it more briefly than he might have. Modern historians believe that as much as one-third of the population died, and one of them calls it “a culling, on a wholly shattering scale.” At the same time, devastating earthquakes and an ominous comet added to a widespread sense of doom.
- Although Justinian’s wars were successful, they had overstretched the resources of the Empire beyond endurance. During his reign, Gibbon comments, the city of Rome was lost and recovered no fewer than five times. And the catastrophe of the plague made matters infinitely worse.
- At this point, the Persians saw their opportunity and mobilized, but they were temporarily held off by Belisarius. Wearily, he continued to put down uprisings all over the East. Toward the end, his forces were so weakened that he had to evade enemies rather than attack them—though in Gibbon’s opinion, he did that so skillfully that “he appeared a more consummate master of the art of war than in the season of his prosperity.”

- In the late 560s, yet another Germanic people, the Lombards, invaded northern Italy. By then, however, Belisarius and Justinian were both gone. They died within a few months of each other in 565.

Suggested Reading

Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*.

Herrin, *Byzantium*.

Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*.

Questions to Consider

1. In telling the story of Belisarius, does Gibbon romanticize military greatness?
2. In what ways do Theodoric and Justinian exemplify Gibbon's idea of political excellence?
3. Does Gibbon underestimate the catastrophic social consequences of the plague?



LECTURE 16

The Breakup of the Empire

The passing of both Justinian and Belisarius in 565 was the end of an era. The emperors in the East continued to style themselves as “Roman,” but never again would they seriously attempt to win back lost provinces. Chapters 45–47 of the *Decline and Fall* begin the tale of the persistence of Byzantium. Gibbon also describes, in these chapters and elsewhere, what became of the regions formerly ruled by the Western Roman Empire.

Gaul Becomes France

- The king of the Franks who unified Gaul was named Clovis. He was the second ruler in the Merovingian dynasty, which had been founded by his father. Clovis became king in 481, and he soon accomplished a series of stunning military successes. At the Battle of Poitiers, Clovis himself killed the Visigoth king Alaric in single combat.
- Clovis consolidated his domain, giving it the name “France.” He established his capital at Paris, where it has remained ever since. He also converted to Roman Catholicism under the influence of his wife, who was later canonized as Saint Clotilde. Northern Europe was no longer Arian; it was now subject to the authority of the Pope.
- Clovis died in 511, and he is still honored in France as the founder of the nation. But what Gibbon prefers to highlight is the drastic decline, by that time, in standards of civilization. What Clovis ruled over was nothing like modern France, and it was much altered from Roman Gaul in its heyday. Modern historians disagree about how drastic the decline really was, but it seems clear that the commercial network of the Empire had dwindled to almost nothing, and that local subsistence had taken its place. As Gibbon tells us:
- The cities were abandoned to solitude and decay; and their coins, their charters, and their synods are still inscribed with the names



of the villas, or rural palaces, in which they successively resided. If some might claim the honors of a fortress, the far greater part could be esteemed only in the light of profitable farms. The mansion of the long-haired kings was surrounded with convenient yards, and stables, for the cattle and the poultry; the garden was planted with useful vegetables.

Latin and the Romance Languages

- With his mastery of languages, Gibbon makes a notable comment about the evolution of Latin into the modern romance tongues:

The Romans communicated to their conquerors the use of the Christian religion and the Latin language; but their language and their religion had alike degenerated from the simple purity of the Augustan and Apostolic age. The progress of superstition and barbarism was rapid and universal; and the rustic dialect of peasants and soldiers was corrupted by a Teutonic idiom and pronunciation.

- Over the centuries, as Germanic peoples settled in Gaul and northern Italy, there was cross-fertilization between their original languages and Latin. In the German forests, they drank beer; after they learned to appreciate wine, they borrowed the Latin name for it. In Latin, it's *vinum*; in German, it's *wein*.
- As for what Gibbon calls “corrupted” pronunciation: For most Anglophones, it's easier to understand spoken Italian and Spanish than spoken French, because the former have retained the consonants in Latin words that divide the syllables. The Franks, on the other hand, tended to slur and drop those markers. And even in Italian and Spanish, the old formal Latin was changing, though not always the same way in both languages.

Italy and the Catholic Church

- In 567, the Lombards arrived in Italy, led by a king called Alboin. The Lombards had been gradually migrating southward from Scandinavia and, more recently, had been living in the region that is now Austria. Alboin was a Christian, but he was Arian, not Catholic. Many of his followers were still pagan.
- Seeking more fertile lands than those along the Danube, the Lombards crossed the Alps and took over the fertile plains in the north of Italy, which still carry the name Lombardy. The Lombard capital was Pavia, in southwestern Lombardy.
- The Lombards never ruled the whole of the Italian Peninsula; no one would do that again until the 19th century. At this point, in the 6th century, there was already a duke of Naples, Venice was an independent city-state, and there was even a representative of the Eastern Roman Empire still living in Ravenna.
- By now, the city of Rome was a shadow of its former self, with a population of something like 50,000. The palace complex on the Palatine Hill was deserted, and the great racecourse in the Circus Maximus had not been used for years. Gibbon imagines a stranger showing up and asking, “Where is the senate, and where are the people?”
- What restored Rome to international prominence was not government, but religion. Gibbon describes the growing power of Catholic Christianity in provocatively neutral language:

Like Thebes, or Babylon, or Carthage, the name of Rome might have been erased from the earth if the city had not been animated by a vital principle, which again restored her to honor and dominion. A vague tradition was embraced, that two Jewish teachers, a tent-maker and a fisherman, had formerly been executed in the circus of Nero, and at the end of five hundred years, their genuine or fictitious relics were adored as the Palladium of Christian Rome.

- In alluding to the Palladium, Gibbon is hinting at the continuity of superstition from paganism to Christianity. And Christians, needless to say, did not consider the story of the tentmaker and the fisherman to be a “vague tradition.” The tentmaker was Saint Paul, and the fisherman was Saint Peter.
- So long as the Germanic “barbarians” followed the Arian faith, they were Christians of a kind, but asserting their independence. By accepting the authority of the Pope, the Franks now acknowledged that they were members of a single Catholic empire—though it was a religious empire, not a political one. The Visigoths likewise saw that it was to their advantage to join in; in 589, they too accepted Catholicism.
- Gibbon has little use for theologians. When a bishop is an able administrator, however, Gibbon is genuinely admiring. This was true of Gregory I, who was Pope from 590–604. Gibbon gives him unstinting praise:

The successor of St. Peter administered his patrimony with the temper of a vigilant and moderate landlord. He acted as a faithful steward of the church and the poor and liberally applied to their wants the inexhaustible resources of abstinence and order. The instant distress of the sick and helpless, of strangers and pilgrims, was relieved by the bounty of each day, and of every hour. Gregory might justly be styled the Father of his Country.

- Gibbon even approves of Gregory’s interests in solemn rituals and in the choral style that is still known as Gregorian chant. He sees these as boosting morale: “The minds of a people,” Gibbon says, “depressed by their present calamities, were directed to the hopes and fears of the invisible world.”
- In addition to faithfully serving his people in Rome, Gregory did much to establish the papacy as the nerve center of Catholic Christendom. He also wrote an extremely influential book called *Regula Pastoralis*, a guide to pastoral care.





Saint Paul
(c. 4 B.C.—c. A.D. 62–64)

The Two Natures of Christ

- Among 6th-century Christian leaders, there was a great struggle to make sense of the concept that God, an eternal deity, could not only assume human form, but submit to death by torture. Some so-called “heretics” denied that Christ was divine; others denied that he was ever human at all. One church council after another was convened to sort things out.
- In 451, the Council of Chalcedon arrived at a solution: Christ was fully human and also fully divine. This was the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. By adopting this doctrine, the council was defining as orthodox the views of Bishop Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria, who had died seven years previously. Gibbon comments sardonically, “The name of Cyril of Alexandria is famous in controversial story, and the title of saint is a mark that his opinions and his party have finally prevailed.”
- As for the actual arguments of Cyril, Gibbon regards them as utterly pointless: “Cyril extended around his cell,” Gibbon says, “the cobwebs of scholastic theology, and meditated the works of allegory and metaphysics, whose remains, in seven verbose folios, now peaceably slumber by the side of their rivals.”
- What interests Gibbon more than the theological arguments is the way the controversy inspired persecution. He gives a vivid account of the worldly behavior of Saint Cyril. There were 40,000 Jews in Alexandria, whose right to worship in their own faith had always been guaranteed by law. This is what Cyril did:

Without any legal sentence, without any royal mandate, the patriarch, at the dawn of day, led a seditious multitude to attack the synagogues. Unarmed and unprepared, the Jews were incapable of resistance. Their houses of prayer were levelled with the ground, and the episcopal warrior, after rewarding his troops with the plunder of their goods, expelled from the city the remnant of the unbelieving nation.

- Breakaway groups continued to develop, however. In Ethiopia, for example, a heresy known as Monophysitism was adopted. According to Monophysitism, Christ had a single nature, not the dual nature that was defined at Chalcedon.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*.

Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is your own sense of whether the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire was also an evolution into something that was strong in its own right?
2. In your own experience of modern languages, how valuable is it to understand their relationship to classical Latin?
3. How convincing are Gibbon's character judgments of Cyril of Alexandria and Pope Gregory I?



LECTURE 17

The Byzantine Empire and Charlemagne

In chapter 48 of the *Decline and Fall*, the Byzantine Empire continues to shrink under a series of cruel and incompetent emperors. Gibbon observes that the events of this period can become discouragingly repetitive, an assertion that deserves further scrutiny from a modern perspective. Chapter 49 goes on to address renewed religious controversy in the East and the rise of the Franks in the West.

Gibbon on Byzantium

- Toward the beginning of chapter 48, it becomes clear that Gibbon's take on Byzantium is very different from that of specialists today. Gibbon's bias, as always, is to focus on the doings of rulers and generals. When Byzantium produced impressive ones, such as Justinian and Belisarius, Gibbon is happy to do them justice. Lacking protagonists like those, he hardly knows what to do with his story.
- Another problem is that Gibbon likes to build his narrative on the work of ancient historians. He made grateful use of Ammianus and, in a later period, Procopius. But at this stage, the surviving records are hopelessly sketchy.
- Modern historians are less concerned with the people at the top. They focus more on culture as a whole and on the economic foundations of society, which have been richly illuminated by archaeological discoveries that were unknown in Gibbon's time.
- In 1081, a genuinely impressive dynasty appeared. This was the Comnenus family, who went on to rule for an entire century. A major concern of the Comnenians was dealing with successive waves of European crusaders, who were arriving to fight the Muslims for control of the Near East. But there is much intervening history that will have to be presented before Gibbon reaches the Crusades.
- After commenting that there were no fewer than 60 emperors during a space of 600 years, Gibbon winds up chapter 48 with one of his evocative meditations on the past. It's superbly crafted—virtually a prose poem:

A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast down a smile of pity and contempt, on the crimes and follies of human ambition, so eager to grasp at a precarious and short-lived enjoyment. It is thus that the experience of history exalts, and enlarges, the horizon of our intellectual view. In a composition

of some days, in a perusal of some hours, six hundred years have rolled away, and the duration of a life or reign is contracted to a fleeting moment. The grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize; and our immortal reason survives and disdains the sixty phantoms of kings who have passed before our eyes and faintly dwell on our remembrance.

The Iconoclastic Controversy

- In the 8th and 9th centuries, a debate among Christian scholars and religious leaders erupted into what was known as the Iconoclastic Controversy (the Greek word means “image breaking”). At issue was the veneration of icons: pictures of Christ, saints, and the Virgin Mary. This is another instance of an issue that was profoundly important to people at the time, but that makes no sense at all to the rational and pragmatic Gibbon.
- Gibbon introduces the subject by saying that the earliest Christians had an “unconquerable repugnance” to the use of images, in the spirit of the second commandment, which forbids “graven images.” Still, it was always possible for theologians to argue that a new dispensation had superseded the old. And, as Gibbon explains, the purity of a faith without any visible images was evidently too demanding for many people:

The more prudent bishops condescended to indulge a visible superstition, for the benefit of the multitude. The devout Christian prayed before the image of a saint; and the pagan rites of genuflection, luminaries, and incense again stole into the Catholic Church.

- If venerating images served such a useful purpose, why would anyone attack it? Gibbon identifies two causes: The first is the ever-recurring claim, on the part of pious people, that the purity of the early Church had been degraded. The second cause is an example of Gibbon's





tendency to ascribe historical change to individuals—in this case, an emperor known as Leo the Isaurian, who came to power in 717.

- By this time, Islam and Judaism were established nearby. Gibbon that their influence on the emperor was obvious:

The emperor Leo the Third, from the mountains of Isauria, ascended the throne of the East. He was ignorant of sacred and profane letters; but his education, his reason, perhaps his intercourse with the Jews and Arabs, had inspired the martial peasant with a hatred of images.

- With his Protestant leanings, Gibbon is inclined to admire this attitude—that's why he expressly mentions Leo's "reason." Conversely, the defense of icons comes in for Gibbon's scorn:

The emperor felt the unforgiving enmity of the monks, the faithful slaves of the superstition to which they owed their riches and influence. They prayed, they preached, they absolved, they inflamed, they conspired; the solitude of Palestine poured forth a torrent of invective.

- Predictably, Gibbon's primary interest is the worldly context. The Catholic Church in the West vigorously defended images. To try to settle the matter, bishops from West as well as East met in a new council at Nicaea, and they declared that the worship of images was indeed authorized by Scripture.
- Most bishops and clergy in the East were scandalized by this ruling, and although the Church in Constantinople temporarily accepted the legalization of images, the western Church was provoked to move toward a complete break with the Eastern. That was when the Byzantine Church acquired the name it still has: Eastern Orthodox.
- Gibbon was unimpressed by theological argument. If he had thought about icons from a different perspective, however, he might have considered how difficult it is to express Christian belief in logical form, and how symbolism was an attractive alternative. Words are notoriously ambiguous, but images can feel immediate and real.
- It also seems likely that condemning images was an important card to play in the game of geopolitics. A persuasive interpretation of the emperor Leo's iconoclasm is this: Not only was he influenced by the Muslim prohibition of images, he was locked in a fierce struggle for supremacy with Muslim opponents.

Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire

- In 751, Pepin the Short became king of the Franks. To enhance his prestige, he had his coronation performed by Archbishop Boniface, who had converted the Germanic peoples to Christianity and was later canonized as a saint.

- When Pepin died 16 years later, he was succeeded by his son Charles. Three decades after that, in 800, Charles went to Rome to be crowned emperor of a large territory that included Burgundy, northern Italy, and much of central Europe. We know Charles today by a more impressive name: Charlemagne. His coronation was performed on Christmas Day in the basilica of Saint Peter.
- Both Charlemagne and the Roman Catholic Church benefited from this alliance. The Pope was recognized not just as head of the Church in the West, but as a spiritual authority who had the power to sanctify kings. As for Charlemagne, he was confirmed as the legitimate successor to the Roman emperors of old. In time, his dominion would become known as the Holy Roman Empire.
- Gibbon has great respect for Charlemagne, another of those exceptional figures who appear from time to time and stand out far above their contemporaries:

The dignity of his person, the length of his reign, the prosperity of his arms, the vigor of his government, and the reverence of distant nations distinguish him from the royal crowd; and Europe dates a new era from his restoration of the Western empire.

- Charlemagne's family dynasty—known as the Carolingian dynasty—was destined to end fairly soon. As Gibbon dryly observes, Charlemagne's heirs didn't stand out above anybody: "The ridiculous epithets of the bald, the stammerer, the fat, and the simple distinguished the tame and uniform features of a crowd of kings, alike deserving of oblivion."
- Though the popes were now claiming total mastery in the West, most of the 9th- and 10th-century popes turned out to be incompetent, or worse. Most significant, as Gibbon sees it, was the failure of the popes to achieve the immense secular power they longed for.
- It was no surprise that the Holy Roman Empire quickly dwindled in influence. Compared with the original Roman Empire, it was never really an empire at all. Instead, it was a confederation of



Charlemagne
(c. 747–814)

loosely connected duchies, counties, and free cities; Gibbon calls it “a monster with an hundred heads.” Its emperors were chosen by election, conducted by seven persons who were authorized to do so.

- Within the Germanic region, this confederation made sense—as long as emperors didn’t try to impose their will too forcefully. Indeed, the name was officially enlarged to “the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.” Not surprisingly, Burgundy and Lombardy soon pulled away. For a single authority to be able to control remote regions, a whole set of factors are essential. As Gibbon says:



An extensive empire must be supported by a refined system of policy and oppression; in the center, an absolute power, prompt in action and rich in resources; a swift and easy communication with the extreme parts; fortifications to check the first effort of rebellion; a regular administration to protect and punish; and a well-disciplined army to inspire fear without provoking discontent and despair.

- For five centuries, the Roman Empire successfully maintained all of these attributes. When it started to lose them, it ceased to be an empire.
- The fundamental weakness of the Holy Roman Empire was probably economic—a factor that interested Gibbon, but about which there wasn't much information in his time. Peter Heather emphasizes that what sustained the old Roman Empire for five centuries was a massive, highly organized system of taxation. The Carolingian state never had a tax base to begin with, and its empire inevitably contracted to those German principalities that had a common interest.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*.

Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*.

Questions to Consider

1. How seriously does Gibbon's emphasis on rulers and generals, rather than on culture more largely, detract from his understanding of Byzantium?
2. How adequate is Gibbon's understanding of the reasons for the veneration of icons and the iconoclastic reaction against them?
3. In what ways was the Holy Roman Empire, as established under Charlemagne, different from the original Roman Empire?



LECTURE 18

The Rise of Islam

The first 49 chapters of the *Decline and Fall* contain only occasional mentions of Muslims and the Arabia from which they sprang. In chapters 50–52, however, Gibbon looks back to provide a full account of the rise of Islam, which he describes as “one of the most memorable revolutions which have impressed a new and lasting character on the nations of the globe.”

Overview of Arabia

- At the outset, Gibbon acknowledges in a footnote that, although it will be obvious that he has done much reading, he has no knowledge of what he calls “the Oriental tongues” and has had to depend on writers in Latin, French, and English. A modern historian of Islam would probably feel disqualified if he or she couldn’t read Arabic, and Gibbon perhaps should have been more conscious of his disadvantage.
- The Romans had a province that they called Arabia, but it was confined to a narrow strip along the Mediterranean coast. The great mass of the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by bands of roving nomads, who were regarded as irrelevant from the perspective of the Empire. The region would be romanticized by English writers after Gibbon’s time, but not by Gibbon himself.
- The sole exception was a highland region near the Indian Ocean where fruit, coffee, and frankincense were cultivated. It was known to the Romans as Arabia Felix (“Happy Arabia”). Compared with the rest of Arabia, Gibbon says, this region “truly deserves the appellation of the happy.”
- Gibbon describes the Arab tribes’ expertise at fighting on horseback with their curved scimitars and with bows and arrows. He admires their fierce independence, obeying tribal leaders but no larger power. “Their spirit is free,” he says, “their steps are unconfined; the desert is open; and the tribes and families are held together by a mutual and voluntary compact.”
- There is much to admire in this way of life, including a tradition of unstinting hospitality to strangers, but there is also an eye-for-an-eye code that strikes Gibbon as shockingly primitive. He mentions feuds that could last for years, during which murders would be avenged by random killing of any member of the murderer’s family.

Mohammed and the Koran

- After providing a survey of the region, Gibbon introduces his readers to Mohammed. Mohammed was born in Mecca in 569. He was illiterate, but admirable in appearance and temperament, as Gibbon describes him:

According to the tradition of his companions, Mahomet was distinguished by the beauty of his person, an outward gift which is seldom despised, except by those to whom it has been refused.

The audience applauded his commanding presence, his majestic aspect, his piercing eye, his gracious smile, his flowing beard, his countenance that painted every sensation of the soul, and his gestures that enforced each expression of the tongue. In the familiar offices of life, he scrupulously adhered to the grave and ceremonious politeness of his country. His memory was capacious and retentive; his wit easy and social; his imagination sublime; his judgment clear, rapid, and decisive. He possessed the courage, both of thought and action; and although his designs might gradually expand with his success, the first idea which he entertained of his divine mission bears the stamp of an original and superior genius.

- At the age of 40, Mohammed had an overwhelming vision. He was inspired to prophesy, and he dictated the Koran to his newly gathered followers. It's not clear how much Gibbon actually knew about the Koran itself, but like other Enlightenment thinkers he considered its strict monotheism preferable by far to the complexity of the Christian Trinity and the cult of the saints:

The Christians of the seventh century had insensibly relapsed into a semblance of paganism. Their public and private vows were addressed to the relics and images that disgraced the temples of the East, the throne of the Almighty was darkened by a cloud of martyrs, and saints, and angels, the objects of popular veneration.

The creed of Mahomet is free from suspicion or ambiguity; and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God.

- The early Muslims knew a great deal about the Judeo-Christian Bible, and they regarded its prophets as inspired forebears. They honored Jesus as one of the prophets, but they could not accept the doctrine that he was literally God, incarnated as a man. To them, that was polytheism. There was only one God, indivisible, and he did not manifest himself personally on earth. What he gave to Mohammed was a sacred book.
- Gibbon also approves of the simplicity of Muslim worship, which he calls “a simple and rational piety” requiring only prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. As always, “rational” is what Gibbon expects religion to be.
- Perhaps unexpectedly, Gibbon seems delighted by the idea of a paradise populated by ravishing houris for each male believer, though he admits that “Mahomet has not specified the male companions of the female elect.” It strikes him as a great idea—an eternity that would



The Koran

continue the enjoyments of this life, rather than leaving them behind as Christian preachers taught.

- After describing Mohammed's message, Gibbon relates the story of Mohammed's life: the Hijrah, in 622, when he left Mecca to escape persecution and settled in Medina; his return with an army seven years later, to win control of Mecca; and finally, his death in 632.
- In a footnote, Gibbon lists numerous historical sources and quietly makes a very significant point: Not one of them dates back to the first 100 years of Islam. In fact, the surviving evidence from the first 200 years of Islam extraordinarily scanty. Non-Muslim historians suspect that the Koran was actually composed over a period of time, like the Bible, and not dictated personally by Mohammed. And they are far from sure they understand exactly what Mohammed himself said and did. These issues are so inflammatory that to this day, Muslim historians steer well clear of them.

The Spread of Islam

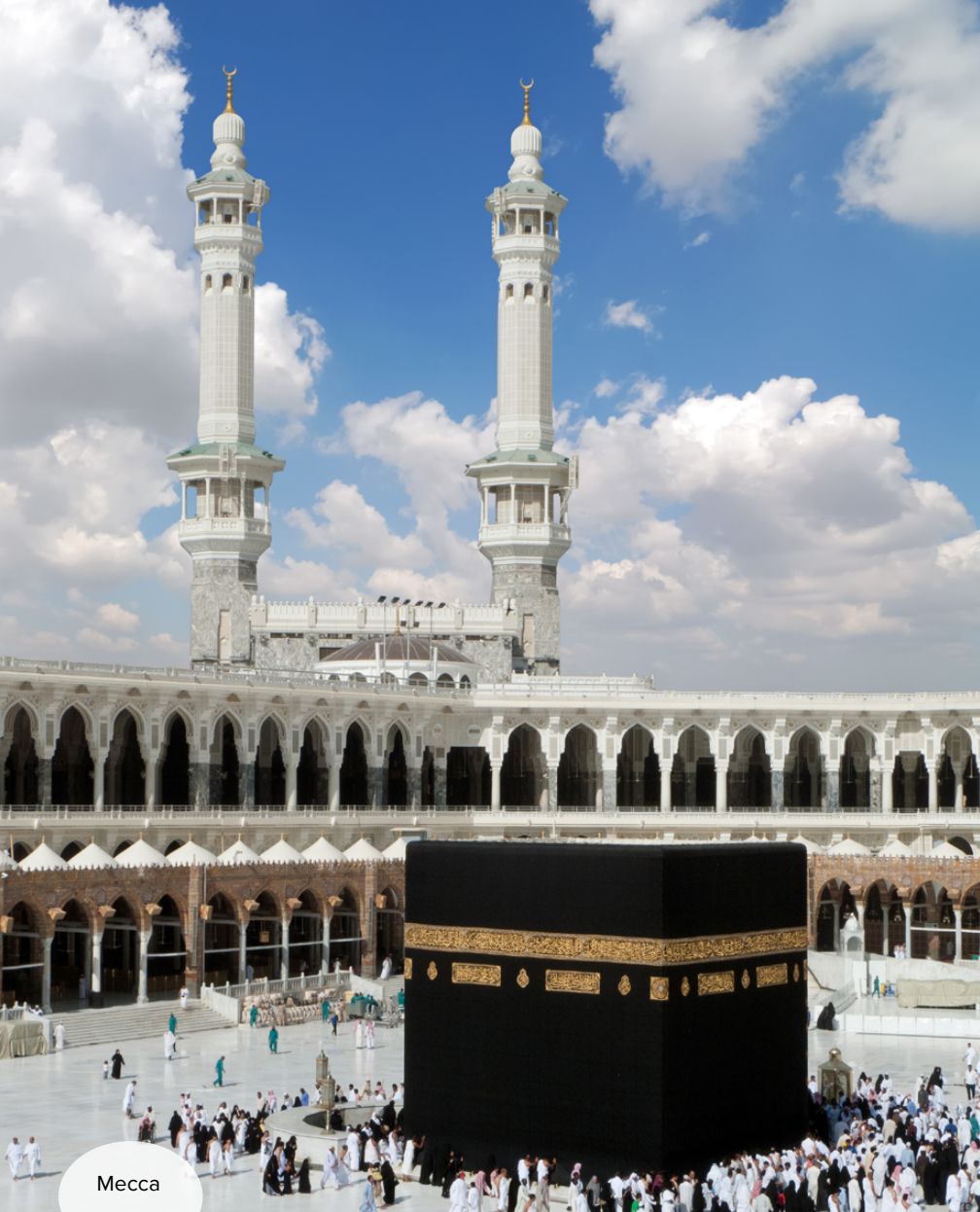
- After Mohammed's death, there was intense competition for control of the powerful new religion. Gibbon describes the emergence of the Sunni and Shiite factions that have been at odds with each other ever since. The main emphasis, however, for the vast panorama of the *Decline and Fall* is not the internal developments of Islam, but its amazing intervention in world history.
- Muslims had a mandate to convert infidels. They were promised that if they did so, their sins would be absolved, and they would enjoy eternal happiness in paradise. Naturally, an appetite for conquest and political control went along with this religious justification. As Gibbon points out, Islam spread with spectacular success:

One hundred years after Mahomet's flight from Mecca, the arms and the reign of his successors extended from India to the Atlantic Ocean, over the various and distant provinces, which



may be comprised under the names of Persia, Syria, Egypt, Africa, and Spain.

- The timeline is remarkable: Mohammed left Mecca in 622, and he died in 632. Just two years after that, Arabs invaded Palestine. By 639, they had conquered Syria, captured Jerusalem, and invaded Egypt. In 650, they conquered Persia and crossed into modern-day Uzbekistan. All of that happened by the middle of the 7th century, when many people who had known Mohammed were still alive.
- In the 8th century, a brand-new Sunni capital was founded at Baghdad, and a Shiite capital was founded at Damascus. Arabs went on to conquer Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain. In Spain, Moorish Muslims built a civilization that lasted for nearly 800 years.
- By now, Muslims controlled more than two-thirds of what had once been the Roman Empire. “The Arabian Empire,” Gibbon says, “extended two hundred days’ journey from east to west, from the confines of Tartary and India, to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.” He adds that a caravan setting out from what is now Morocco would take four or five months to reach the city of Surat on the western coast of India.
- The Arabs were not barbarians, and Gibbon emphasizes the great contributions to civilization that were made by Muslim scientists and thinkers. Anyone who has tried to use Roman numerals knows how unsuitable they must have been for math. Arabic numerals, as Gibbon says, “have promoted the most important discoveries of arithmetic, algebra, and the mathematical sciences.” The very word “algebra” comes from Arabic. Likewise, modern chemistry developed from alchemy, and “alchemy” is an Arabic word.
- Chapter 52 ends with an account of successive Muslim rulers. As it turns out, their stories parallels those of the Romans and the Greeks—so much so that Gibbon calls this period “the decline and fall of the Empire of the Caliphs.” As always, immoderate size and complexity doom any empire. After describing two specific causes, Gibbon



Mecca



concludes, “The third, and most obvious cause, was the weight and magnitude of the empire itself.”

Suggested Reading

Asbridge, *The Crusades*.

Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*.

Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*.

Questions to Consider

1. How adequate, in your opinion, is Gibbon’s understanding of Islam? Is he justified in contrasting it with Christianity?
2. How serious a handicap is Gibbon’s ignorance of Arabic and other Eastern languages?



LECTURE 19

The Byzantine Empire in the 10th Century

The historical sweep of Gibbon's narrative in chapters 53–57 of the *Decline and Fall* is incredibly broad. Among other topics, Gibbon addresses in these chapters the problems of Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire, religious controversies arising centuries apart, and conquests by the Normans and the Turks.

Problems in the East and West

- The Byzantine Empire had contracted drastically by now, but Constantinople itself was still magnificent. A traveler at the time said that only Baghdad could compare with it—far different, Gibbon comments, from “the ruins of Rome, or the mud walls, wooden hovels, and narrow precincts of Paris and London.”
- With its favorable position as a nexus of trade, Constantinople had continued over the years to increase in wealth. Gibbon likes to imagine the wealth in literal terms: “From every province of Europe and Asia, the rivulets of gold and silver discharged into the Imperial reservoir a copious and perennial stream.”
- The reservoir analogy is not a positive one, however. Gibbon believed that European economists of his own time knew how to keep money circulating for the common benefit. The Byzantine emperors, by contrast, took money out of circulation and locked it away in vaults. Still worse, the expenditures they did make were on luxuries that Gibbon regarded as frivolous.
- A detailed survey follows of administrative positions and military organization—necessary to describe, no doubt, but not especially interesting today. Gibbon also makes favorable reference to Byzantine scholarship and science, though with his usual claim that it was hopelessly unoriginal. In a paragraph headed “Decay of Taste and Genius,” he says that although Byzantine writers had full access to what he calls the “sacred patrimony” of their ancestors, they didn’t inherit their ancestors’ spirit.
- Gibbon acknowledges that things were even worse in Western Europe at the time. Outside of monasteries, literacy had all but died out. And after the collapse of Charlemagne’s short-lived empire, scores of regions became virtually independent, producing a kind of international anarchy.

- Gibbon doesn't share the admiration, which would become common during the 19th century, for knights in shining armor and their feats of derring-do. They were a bunch of thugs, in Gibbon's opinion, always on the lookout for trouble: "It was the glory of the nobles of France, that in their humble dwellings, war and rapine were the only pleasure, the sole occupation, of their lives."
- At this stage, people in the East had little reason to pay much attention to Europe. Constantinople even discontinued the use of Latin, which until then had remained the official language of administration. But the time would come when the bellicose habits of the European nobility would provoke a long succession of aggressive Crusades, which were officially mounted to win back the Holy Land from the Arabs, but which were, in fact, expeditions to grab territory in the East. The Byzantine emperors were usually on good terms with their Arab neighbors and were far from enthusiastic about these developments.

Religious Digressions

- Religious controversy rears its head yet again in chapter 54 of the *Decline and Fall*. A new heretical sect, known as the Paulicians, had emerged in Armenia. The origin of their name is uncertain, but the Paulicians may have been claiming to restore the pure faith that was preached by Saint Paul.
- In addition to denouncing the worship of images, the Paulicians held a dualistic view of the universe. According to them, the world we live in was created not by God, but by God's evil antagonist. This was totally incompatible with the orthodox doctrine of an omnipotent God who created absolutely everything. Consequently, the Paulicians were stamped out.
- Gibbon tells the story of the Paulicians because he sees them as precursors of later rebellious groups that would lead, ultimately, to the Protestant Reformation. For a long time, the Catholic Church would



succeed in suppressing such rebels. But the time would come, much to Gibbon's satisfaction, when the lid would finally blow off. When Luther and Calvin emerged in the 16th century, Christendom would be permanently fragmented.

- At this point in the narrative, Gibbon jumps far ahead, offering what amounts to a celebration of the Reformation. He begins chapter 54 with a brisk overview of Protestant thinking—a complete departure from the basic chronology of the *Decline and Fall*.
- There are elements in Protestant theology that Gibbon greatly dislikes, including the doctrine of predestination. Both Luther and Calvin insisted upon predestination, as Augustine had long before. In a provocative footnote in chapter 33, Gibbon points out that the Catholic Church denounced Calvin but made Augustine a saint, even though it's far from easy to tell their arguments apart. "The real difference between them," Gibbon says, "is invisible, even to a theological microscope."
- On the other hand, Gibbon heartily approves of the Protestant campaigns against the veneration of saints and against the supremacy of the Pope, as well as the Protestant insistence that Scripture must be interpreted by each individual conscience.

An Expanding Narrative

- In chapter 55, the scope of Gibbon's narrative expands, as evidenced by his summary of the topics covered in the chapter: "The Bulgarians; Origin, Migrations, and Settlement of the Hungarians; Their Inroads in the East and West; The Monarchy of Russia; Geography and Trade; Wars of the Russians against the Greek Empire; Conversion of the Barbarians."
- Chapter 56 is devoted to the Normans, who especially interest Gibbon because of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. The Normans were originally Vikings who arrived in the 9th century as



raiders from the sea. The Vikings in Normandy and southern England were Danish, and an area they controlled in eastern England was known as the Danelaw. The Vikings in Scotland and Ireland were mostly Norwegian.

- After 1066, the kings of England were simultaneously dukes of Normandy as well as kings, and their dynasty—known by their family name, Plantagenet—continued to claim large territories on the Continent. By the end of the 12th century, they controlled the entire western half of France, all the way down to Spain. Further conquests in Italy led the Normans as far south as Naples and Sicily.



Plantagenet
king dining

- Chapter 57 begins with a major segue—an impressively panoramic view of huge changes that will be happening in the East. Gibbon is truly gifted at condensing vast material into a deftly structured paragraph:

From the Isle of Sicily, the reader must transport himself beyond the Caspian Sea, to the original seat of the Turks or Turkmans. Their Scythian empire of the sixth century was long since dissolved; and the fragments of the nation, each a powerful and independent people, were scattered over the desert, from China to the Oxus and the Danube. While Apulia and Sicily were subdued by the Norman lance, a swarm of these northern shepherds overspread the kingdom of Persia; their princes, of the race of Seljuk, erected a splendid and solid empire, from Samarkand to the confines of Greece and Egypt; and the Turks have maintained their dominion in Asia Minor, till the victorious crescent has been planted on the dome of St. Sophia.

- The *Decline and Fall* is often described as epic in scope, and passages like this one justify the analogy. But there is a major difference as well: An epic has a coherent story line. The *Decline and Fall* has a coherent story line up until the abdication of the last Roman emperor in the West. After that, however, Gibbon has to interweave a medley of separate stories, jumping forward and backward in time. It's a tribute to his mastery that he does it so well. A more conventional historian would proceed year by year, decade by decade.
- Gibbon continues chapter 57 with the 11th-century Persian ruler Mahmood, who extended the Persian empire into India and was the first to be called by the title "Sultan." Mahmood's son Massud was later defeated by invading Turks, who thereupon founded the Seljuk dynasty. What followed was a religious conversion of the previously pagan Turks that would have profound implications for the future: "The whole body of the Turkish nation," Gibbon says, "embraced, with fervor and sincerity, the religion of Mahomet."



- The Turks proceeded to conquer Armenia and Georgia. They even threatened Constantinople, but a peaceful resolution was found. Gibbon concludes the chapter by recounting further conquests by the Seljuk Turks—in particular, their capture of Jerusalem in 1071.

Suggested Reading

Findley, *The Turks in World History*.

Neveux, *A Brief History of the Normans*.

Questions to Consider

1. How effective are Gibbon's attempts to debunk any tendency to romanticize feudalism?
2. Is Gibbon's claim convincing that the theology of Augustine is hardly distinguishable from the theology of Luther and Calvin?
3. Is Gibbon successful in covering the history of this period in separate thematic chapters, rather than following strict chronology?



The Crusades

After long centuries during which Europe had little interest in affairs in the East, the eruption of the Crusades at the end of the 11th century suddenly brought West and East into fierce conflict that would last for 200 years. This lecture examines chapters 58–61 of the *Decline and Fall*, which contain Gibbon's account of the Crusades, and chapters 62–63, which concern the state of Byzantium following the Crusades.

Motivations for the Crusades

- Historians in the 18th century had a largely positive view of the Crusades. More generally, people tended to have a romantic notion of courageous knights sallying forth to rescue the Holy Land from the Muslims. They didn't care that the Muslims also regarded Jerusalem as holy, as did the Jews.
- To Gibbon, these views are just special pleading and rationalization. Insofar as religion was the motivation for the Crusades, Gibbon sees it as a deplorable case of bigoted fanaticism that was deliberately encouraged by the leaders of the Church.
- Gibbon emphasizes that worldly motives were at least as significant as religious ones. The Crusades gave noblemen and knights, who were accustomed to fighting each other, a new way to gain glory. More importantly, it was an opportunity for Europeans to seize rich territories at the far end of the Mediterranean. Gibbon's narrative focuses on the way religion was used to rationalize aggression, both military and territorial.

The Story of the Crusades

- In 1095, Pope Urban II went on an extensive preaching tour throughout Europe, calling for a crusade against the allegedly brutal Muslims. The Pope was looking for a way to enhance the power of the papacy, and he hoped that a crusade would mobilize support for his leadership.
- Gibbon begins his narrative not with the Pope, but with a demagogic preacher known as Peter the Hermit, who had visited Turkish-held Jerusalem and returned home to cry out for its liberation. As Gibbon describes him, Peter the Hermit was a fanatic, and his fanaticism was so contagious that it infected even the Pope.
- Tens of thousands of ordinary people immediately set out on foot for a faraway destination they knew almost nothing about. This was the



so-called “People’s Crusade,” and it was doomed to failure. Most of the mob of unskilled pedestrians never got as far as Constantinople, let alone the Holy Land. Gibbon does not add that shortly after setting out, they paused in the Rhineland to massacre Jews.

- This chaotic episode was an aberration. The real First Crusade took a while to organize, and it was led by French noblemen, each of whom assembled his own body of troops. Fighting had always been the full-time occupation of these men, who idealized their behavior

as “chivalrous.” They fought on horseback with weapons and armor, something only the wealthy could afford to do.

- Gibbon does not deny that many crusaders were brave and high-principled. He even says that Tancred embodied “all the virtues of a perfect knight; the true spirit of chivalry.” Tancred is one of those figures who gained lasting immortality from the Crusades. Notwithstanding his skepticism about militarism, Gibbon can’t help buying into the Tancred legend. He overlooks—or at least doesn’t highlight—Tancred’s hunger for power and advancement.



- What Gibbon especially deplores is the way Pope Urban III exploited the situation for the advantage of the Church. The Pope assured crusaders that they would be cleansed of their sins by this holy mission. To raise money for the expensive undertaking, he began to sell indulgences. These were official documents with which sinners could purchase absolution in heaven for any sins they had committed, according to a fixed scale of prices. “These alms,” Gibbon says, “were soon appropriated to the use of the Church, which derived from the redemption of sins an inexhaustible source of opulence and dominion.”
- In 1097, the crusaders set out. Gibbon describes their equipment in detail, stressing the difference between the Saracen light cavalry, who were armed with scimitars and with bows and arrows, and the ponderous warhorses on which European knights, encased in heavy armor and with lances pointing forward, thundered into action.
- The Byzantine emperor at the time was Alexius Comnenus. Alexius was deeply suspicious of these formidable newcomers, and with good reason. If they could have pulled it off, they would have captured Constantinople for themselves. He recognized that his best policy was to work out a way to coexist with them, and he was grateful to the Frankish leader Godfrey for opposing his colleagues’ eagerness to attack.
- Advancing southward along the coast, the crusaders next arrived at the great city of Antioch and laid siege to it. In 1099, two years after they had left France, the crusaders finally reached Jerusalem. They then carried out what Gibbon calls “a promiscuous massacre,” slaughtering 70,000 Muslims and burning down a synagogue in which Jews had taken refuge. Godfrey was acclaimed the ruler of Jerusalem. The city and surrounding region would remain under Frankish rule for nearly a century.
- Having accomplished their objective, most of the crusaders went home. The Second Crusade would be launched 50 years later, in 1147, and the Third Crusade 42 years after that, in 1189. In Gibbon’s opinion,



these represent nothing more than futile repetitions, and he declines to narrate them in much detail.

- Over and over, ambitious attempts by European crusaders ended in failure. It makes sense, Gibbon says, that before the First Crusade, there was great optimism. But it makes no sense at all “that six succeeding generations should have rushed headlong down the precipice that was open before them.”
- At the end of the 12th century, the Saracens found a new champion: Saladin. A Kurd who became sultan of Egypt and Syria, Saladin retook Jerusalem in 1187. That shocking development is what provoked the Third Crusade. The European champion this time was Richard I of England, celebrated as Richard the Lionheart.
- Gibbon treats Saladin with great respect. He was notably generous in pardoning captives instead of executing them. “In these acts of mercy,” Gibbon says, “the virtue of Saladin deserves our admiration and love.” Gibbon has less respect for Richard I, whose reputation, Gibbon thinks, owes more to legend than fact.
- During the next 20 years, the Fourth Crusade and the Fifth Crusade were launched. These were masterminded by a new pope, Innocent III. The final crusades—the Sixth Crusade and the Seventh Crusade—took place in the middle of the 13th century. These were led by King Louis IX of France, who was so notable for his piety that not long after his death he was canonized a saint. As far as crusading went, however, Louis IX never even made it to Jerusalem.
- During the course of the Crusades, a number of Frankish kingdoms were established in the East. These were known collectively as the Crusader states. To defend them, two notable military orders were founded: the Knights Templar and the Hospitallers. Both orders became impressively wealthy, and by the end of the 12th century they were effectively the bankers of Europe. One by one, however, the Crusader states were retaken by the Saracens.

The Impact of the Crusades

- The long-term effects of the Crusades were much discussed in Gibbon's day. Gibbon's take, which he spells out toward the end of chapter 61, is balanced and thoughtful.
- One positive development that could not have been anticipated by the crusading nobles themselves was the erosion of the feudal system. Because there were no nationwide budgets for the Crusades, the crusaders themselves had to furnish and pay for troops by selling off large parts of their domains. As Gibbon puts it:

Their poverty extorted from their pride those charters of freedom which unlocked the fetters of the slave, secured the farm of the peasant and the shop of the artificer, and gradually restored a substance and a soul to the most numerous and useful part of the community.

- Some Enlightenment historians claimed that the Crusades provided a great stimulus to trade, pouring wealth into Venice and other European cities. Gibbon doesn't deny this, but he points out that it happened at immense cost—in human lives, and also in economic activity that would have been better spent improving life at home.

Byzantium after the Crusades

- In chapter 60, Gibbon returns to Constantinople to pick up events that were happening at the same time as the Crusades. The Byzantine emperors were not sorry to see the Saracens under attack, but they had no interest in taking part themselves. The Europeans resented their refusal to get involved. In 1203, a Venetian force captured Constantinople, and the Venetians and the French worked out a system of joint rule, putting a young Count of Flanders named Baldwin on the throne.

- There followed a lot of pillaging. Gibbon is especially grieved by the loss of great works of art that were melted down for their metal or simply burned. And the rampaging Latins had no interest in preserving priceless Greek manuscripts, which they weren't even able to read. "We may drop a tear," Gibbon says at the end of the chapter, "over the libraries that perished in the fire of Constantinople."
- Latin rule was bitterly resented, and the people of Constantinople summoned outside help. In 1261, a king of Bulgaria defeated Baldwin and took him prisoner. Constantinople had been under Latin control for almost 60 years. Historians tell us that this episode was a turning point for what was left of the Eastern Roman Empire. Even after the Europeans were gone, the great city of Constantinople no longer dominated the way it once did.

Suggested Reading

Asbridge, *The Crusades*.

Herrin, *Byzantium*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does Gibbon's account of the inspiration for the Crusades, and the motives of the participants, reflect a persistent bias against religion, or is the case he makes persuasive?
2. Even if Gibbon intends to qualify the romantic image of warriors such as Tancred, Richard the Lionheart, and Saladin, does he end up seduced by their legend?



Genghis Khan and Tamerlane

Chapters 64–65 of the *Decline and Fall* mark one of the narrative’s great turning points. Gibbon charts the course in chapter 64’s opening lines: “From the petty quarrels of a city and her suburbs, from the cowardice and discord of the falling Greeks, I shall now ascend to the victorious Turks.” Before he gets to the Turks, however, Gibbon must describe the exploits of one of history’s most extraordinary leaders: Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan

- The man we know as Genghis Khan was born with the name Temujin. “Genghis Khan” was the title given to him as leader of the Mongols. (In the Turkic and Mongol languages, “khan” means “ruler.”) In the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon refers to him as “Zingis,” a variant of “Genghis.”
- Genghis was the latest in the long series of nomadic leaders who descended upon the Mediterranean world from the steppes of central Asia. Gibbon describes him thus:

The Mogul emperor became the monarch of the pastoral world, the lord of many millions of shepherds and soldiers, who felt their united strength, and were impatient to rush on the mild and wealthy climates of the south.

- The Mongols—also known as the Moguls—began by conquering the northern provinces of China in 1210. They then turned westward, arriving at the borders of the Muslim Kwarazmian dynasty in northwest India. The Kwarazmians were soon overwhelmed by Genghis Khan’s forces.
- Genghis could be ruthless. After one rebellion was put down, 70 of the rebels died by immersion in cauldrons of boiling water. But Gibbon sees Genghis as a judicious leader:

In a state of society in which policy is rude and valor is universal, the ascendant of one man must be founded on his power and his resolution to punish his enemies and recompense his friends.

- For Genghis Khan, cruelty was an element in a calculated policy. This calculated cruelty was very different from the random sadism of so many of the Roman emperors.



Genghis Khan
(1162–1227)



- Gibbon is especially struck by the undogmatic simplicity of Mogul religious beliefs:

It is the religion of Zingis that best deserves our wonder and applause. The Catholic inquisitors of Europe, who defended nonsense by cruelty, might have been confounded by the example of a barbarian who anticipated the lessons of philosophy and established by his laws a system of pure theism and perfect toleration. His first and only article of faith was the existence of one God, the author of all good.

- Genghis died in 1227, leaving behind a harem of 500 wives and concubines, as well as four chief sons, who went on to extend the Mogul empire during the remainder of the 13th century.
- In 1271, Kublai Khan—a grandson of Genghis—founded the Yuan dynasty in China. Another of Genghis's grandsons, Hologou Khan, conquered Persia and pillaged the cities of Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus in the 1250s.
- In Russia, the Moguls became known as Tartars, and also as the Golden Horde. They were indeed fearsome, burning Moscow and Kiev to ashes. They swarmed through Poland as far as the borders of Germany. And after a huge battle at Liegnitz in Poland, they celebrated their victory in a way that Gibbon captures in a telling detail: "They filled nine sacks with the right ears of the slain."

The Ottoman Empire

- Terrifying as the Moguls were, theirs was not to be the last invasion by a nomadic tribe. The power of the Moguls in Asia Minor began to weaken. In 1299, they were supplanted by another people from the steppes, whose leader became known as the caliph Othman. His domain, accordingly, was called the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans were still in power 500 years later when Gibbon was writing the *Decline and Fall*.

- A previous body of Turks, the Seljuks, had already established itself in the region 130 years earlier. Like the Seljuks before them, the Ottomans were not mere slash-and-burn raiders, but administrators of an organized political system. And like the Seljuks before them, the Ottomans converted to Islam. But they had no intention of accepting the authority of the Arab Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite.
- During the 1330s, the Ottomans consolidated their gains under Orchan, the son of Othman. Orchan wounded the Greek emperor Andronicus in battle and took possession of the province of Bithynia, which lay between the Black and the Mediterranean Seas. Constantinople was now embedded inside Ottoman territory.
- After getting established during the first part of the 14th century, an Ottoman force under Sultan Amurath I invaded the Balkans. The Byzantines who had been governing the region didn't even try to resist. One consequence of this invasion was the conversion of a large extent of the Balkan region to Islam.

Tamerlane

- At the beginning of the 15th century, the Turks were on the brink of seizing Constantinople when a new group of nomadic conquerors burst onto the scene. This unforeseen turn of events provides Gibbon with a dramatic chapter ending:

The savage sultan would have devoured his prey, if, in the fatal moment, he had not been overthrown by another savage, stronger than himself. By the victory of Timur, or Tamerlane, the fall of Constantinople was delayed about fifty years; and this important, though accidental, service may justly introduce the life and character of the Mogul conqueror."

- Timur—commonly referred to in the West as Tamerlane—was born in what is now Uzbekistan. He became a formidable warrior, establishing himself as ruler of a region in central Asia called Zagatai around 1370.



Tamerlane
(1336–1405)

Gibbon comments that another man might have thought that that was plenty, but not Tamerlane. He set out to recover everything that had once been ruled by Genghis Khan, claiming to have a special mandate from God.

- Tamerlane successively conquered Persia, Turkistan, and Hindustan. He then sacked Aleppo, burned Damascus to the ground, returned to Aleppo to burn it down as well, and finished by demolishing Baghdad. It was Tamerlane's custom, after each triumph, to have his soldiers make a pyramid of decapitated heads; in Baghdad, they piled up 90,000 of them. In 1405, Tamerlane added Samarkand to his list of conquests.
- According to Gibbon, Tamerlane accumulated 27 royal crowns in all. Eventually, however, the firestorm burned itself out. Heading for China on the caravan route famously known as the Silk Road, Tamerlane caught a fever and died at the age of 70. "His designs were lost," Gibbon says, "his armies were disbanded; China was saved."
- Like Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, Tamerlane was remembered in the West as a mythic figure. Gibbon devotes 25 pages to him, knowing that his readers will devour everything he can give them.
- After Tamerlane's death, his sons quarreled with each other, and his short-lived empire broke apart. One of its surviving fragments became the Muslim Mughal Empire in India.
- By 1421, the Ottomans were united again, under Sultan Amurath II. Gibbon notes that although these rulers were direct descendants of the original Turkman conquerors, their subjects were Eastern peoples of every description. He makes the point with a picturesque detail:

The primitive subjects of Othman were the four hundred families of wandering Turkmans, who had followed his ancestors from the Oxus to the Sangar; and the plains of Anatolia are still



covered with the white and black tents of their rustic brethren. But this original drop was dissolved in the mass of voluntary and vanquished subjects, who, under the name of Turks, are united by the common ties of religion, language, and manners.

Suggested Reading

Lamb, *Tamerlane*.

Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*.

Questions to Consider

1. To what extent does Gibbon's account of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane alter the image of them that you may have picked up over the years?
2. Does Gibbon overemphasize battles at the expense of cultural change?



LECTURE 22

The Fall of Constantinople

Chapters 66–70 of the *Decline and Fall* cover the fall of Byzantium and revival in the West. Gibbon's goal in this section is to bring closure to the story of the Eastern Roman Empire before returning, one last time, to Rome. This lecture tracks Gibbon's increasingly achronological narrative as the end of the book's final volume approaches.

Help Wanted

- During the reign of the emperor Andronicus, Byzantium made overtures to the West. Representatives went in 1339 with two ambitious proposals: One was to convene a new synod, summoning bishops from the entire Christian world, to try to heal the rift between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. The other proposal was to mobilize yet another crusade against the Muslims.
- The kings of France and Naples, Gibbon says dryly, “declined the dangers and glory of a Crusade.” As for the Church, the Byzantines could not have picked a worse time to attempt anything in that direction. Pope Benedict XII, as Gibbon contemptuously presents him, “was a dull peasant, perplexed with scruples and immersed in sloth and wine. His pride might enrich, with a third crown, the papal tiara, but he was alike unfit for the regal and the pastoral office.”
- To actually meet with the Pope, the Byzantine ambassadors journeyed not to Rome, but to Avignon in southern France. The kings of France had long resented papal claims for worldly authority, which they regarded as presumptuous. When a Frenchman became the Pope in 1305—taking the name Clement V—he refused to move to Rome at all and established his court at Avignon instead. It would remain there for nearly 70 years. And even after the papacy returned to Rome, a series of antipopes in Avignon claimed that they were the real popes, not the ones in Rome.
- In 1438, a great council was held in Florence. Its goal was to reestablish unity between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. When the council disbanded, it proclaimed that after a separation of 600 years, the Pope “had reconciled the Catholics of the East and West in one fold and under one shepherd.” This was not actually the case, however.
- The true motive for all of this was the desperate need of Byzantium for military aid, with the hope that offering a compromise on religion might encourage it. The Pope did promise to supply some galleys and



Palais des
Papes, Avignon

soldiers to help defend Constantinople against the Turks, but this was an extremely modest payoff.

- One important development of a different kind followed from this episode: an influx of Greek literature and scholarship that immensely enriched the West and provided an essential stimulus for the Renaissance. Gibbon practically shudders when he imagines what would have happened if Constantinople had fallen to the Turks earlier than it did. If not for Byzantine copies, we would have almost nothing by Plato, Euclid, Sophocles, or Thucydides.

The Fall of Constantinople

- A new character appears at the beginning of chapter 68: “the great destroyer, Mahomet the Second.” Mahomet was obsessed with capturing Constantinople at last—and unlike many before him, he actually succeeded. His success is due in part to a Greek defector,

who created for Mahomet an enormous cannon with which to attack the city. Smaller cannons were mounted on ships in the nearby harbor and used to attack the city at its most vulnerable point.

- Gibbon usually welcomes an opportunity for a full-scale battle piece, but he acknowledges that it would be inappropriate here. There are no heroes to describe and no tactics to speak of, as there would have been on a conventional battlefield. Gibbon explains:

In the uniform and odious pictures of a general assault, all is blood and horror and confusion; nor shall I strive, at the distance of three centuries and a thousand miles, to delineate a scene of which there could be no spectators, and of which the actors themselves were incapable of forming any just or adequate idea.

- Constantinople finally fell on May 29, 1453. Approximately 60,000 people were sold into slavery. The city's great libraries were ransacked, and more than 100,000 manuscripts disappeared.

Returning to Rome

- As he shifts his focus back to Rome, Gibbon acknowledges in a footnote that there has been a lot of jumping back and forth: "The reader has been so long absent from Rome, that I would advise him to recollect or review the forty-ninth chapter, in the fifth volume of this History."
- At this point in Rome's history, the popes were behaving like mini-emperors. Gibbon says that Rome "acquiesced under the absolute dominion of the popes about the same time that Constantinople was enslaved by the Turkish arms."
- Competing European nobles continued to lead private armies and wage vendettas against each other. "In the feudal system of Europe," Gibbon says, "arms were the title of distinction and the measure of allegiance; and amidst their tumult, the still voice of law and reason

was seldom heard or obeyed.” Even in Rome itself, successive popes found that they had diminishing authority, and they were sometimes subject to violent assaults.

- A version of the old Roman Republic was set up, but it was nothing like the original. It didn’t have an effective senate, it didn’t have consuls, and it was a “republic” only in the sense of not having a king. In 1265, when its failure had become obvious, the Romans invited the count of Provence to take over. Having already conquered Sicily and Naples, in Rome he modestly accepted the title of “perpetual senator”—there would be no elections, of course.
- Papal succession was a different matter altogether. In those days, the entire clergy was allowed to participate in the election of a new pope, and even laypersons took part. There were no standard rules. When rival factions couldn’t agree, they might even elect competing popes at the same time.
- Things were eventually straightened out when Pope Alexander III established the system that is still in place today. Voting is restricted to the members of the College of Cardinals. Shortly after a pope’s death, the cardinals are secluded in a locked conclave, where they remain until they agree on a new pope.

The Story of Rienzi

- Chapter 70, the penultimate chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, returns to the period when the papacy was in Avignon. In this chapter, Gibbon describes the emergence in Rome of an extraordinary populist leader named Cola di Rienzo, known also as Rienzi.
- At a time when Roman nobles thought they ran everything, Rienzi rose from the humblest of origins. As Gibbon reports: “The marriage of an innkeeper and a washer woman produced the future deliverer of Rome.” In spite of his poverty, Rienzi got a good education. He was inspired by the examples set by great leaders and orators of the past.



Cola di Rienzo
(1313—1354)

- After persuading his fellow Romans that the nobles had no real power against organized opposition, Rienzi ordered the nobles to go away to their country estates, and they meekly obeyed. Rienzi turned out to have exceptional administrative ability. He put the finances of the city in order and ended abuses of the legal system. Finally, when these matters were settled, the nobles were permitted to return.
- Gibbon is so taken with Rienzi that he devotes 20 pages to him. His admiration is obvious in passages such as the following: “Never, perhaps, has the energy and effect of a single mind been more remarkably felt than in the sudden, though transient, reformation of Rome by the tribune Rienzi.”
- In fact, Rienzi had ambitions that were even more spectacular:

The deliverance of his country inspired Rienzi with a vast and perhaps visionary idea of uniting Italy in a great federative

republic, of which Rome should be the ancient and lawful head, and the free cities and princes the members and associates.

- Rienzi imagined these things in the 14th century, 500 years before Italy would actually unite. And even then, Italy still had a king. That wouldn't end until 1946.
- Unfortunately, Rienzi's populist movement couldn't last. Aristocrats throughout Italy were appalled at the idea of a national republic. The Pope, who would have lost his own power over the Papal States, ordered that Rienzi be brought to trial. Rienzi then abdicated and went into exile. He returned to Rome in 1354 and briefly regained power, but he was murdered by a mob after he began acting arbitrarily. Gibbon ends the remarkable story as follows:

Posterity will compare the virtues and failings of this extraordinary man; but in a long period of anarchy and servitude, the name of Rienzi has often been celebrated as the deliverer of his country and the last of the Roman patriots.

The Great Schism

- Gibbon next describes the Great Schism, when, from 1378–1417, there were no fewer than three rival popes. (Confusingly, the term “Great Schism” can also refer to an earlier dispute, between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity.)
- Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome from Avignon in 1377, and he died the following year. To replace him, the cardinals elected Urban VI, who proved to be a vicious character. As Gibbon says, “They soon discovered the features of the tyrant, who could walk in his garden and recite his breviary while he heard from an adjacent chamber six cardinals groaning on the rack.”
- Not surprisingly, outside forces thought they saw an opportunity. King Ladislaus of Naples arrived and declared that he was going to be



the king of Rome. And the rivalry among competing popes only got more revolting. One of them, who went by the name of John XXIII, was convicted of numerous crimes, including piracy, murder, rape, sodomy, and incest.

- In 1417, the Council of Constance finally sorted things out, and a worthy Roman was accepted by everyone as Pope Martin V. “Rome accepted with joy and obedience,” Gibbon says, “the noblest of her sons.”
- Life was peaceful once again, though Gibbon can’t help regretting the loss of the idealism of Rienzi: “In Rome, the voice of freedom and discord is no longer heard; and, instead of the foaming torrent, a smooth and stagnant lake reflects the image of idleness and servitude.”
- Gibbon is also aware, however, that his attitude toward religion may seem unfair. He ends chapter 70 on a personal note: “For myself, it is my wish to depart in charity with all mankind; nor am I willing, in these last moments, to offend even the pope and clergy of Rome.”

Suggested Reading

Herrin, *Byzantium*.

Questions to Consider

1. How serious an obstacle to understanding is Gibbon’s frequent scrambling of chronology—for example, in the penultimate chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, his recounting of events that happened at the time of the Crusades?
2. Is it surprising that the conservative Gibbon empathizes so wholeheartedly with the populist reformer Rienzi?
3. Does Gibbon give a convincing picture of a Catholic Church unfaithful to its true values, or do you sense the bias of a Protestant Englishman showing through?





LECTURE 23

The End of Gibbon's Work

Finding an appropriate ending is always challenging for a writer. To keep the *Decline and Fall* from simply petering out, Gibbon returns in chapter 71 to a solution he had anticipated 12 years earlier in the preface to his first volume. Gibbon wrote then that he “would scarcely be able to restrain his curiosity from making some inquiry into the state of the city of Rome, during the darkness and confusion of the Middle Ages.”

Destruction and Decay

- In chapter 71, Gibbon makes the famous statement, “I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion.” He says this in reference to the city of Rome itself, not the Roman Empire as a whole. What Gibbon wants is to refute is the common misconception that it was barbarians who demolished the city’s great buildings. The barbarians’ raids on the city were brief, Gibbon reminds us, and “portable wealth was the object of their search.”
- Gibbon notes that the Church did quite a bit of demolishing: “The statues, altars, and houses of the demons were an abomination in their eyes.” But even that is not the whole story. True, the Church tore down pagan temples and sometimes converted them into churches. But what about the city’s secular buildings? Why were they so badly ravaged?
- The answer is that many buildings were destroyed by the Roman people themselves. “The edifices of Rome,” Gibbon says, “might be considered as a vast and various mine.” Building stones were available, already cut conveniently to shape, and they were held together by bars of useful metal that were easy to melt down. There was also plenty of beautifully polished marble that was especially attractive for repurposing.
- Another culprit, Gibbon says, is “the most potent and forcible cause of destruction, the domestic hostilities of the Romans themselves.” There had always been riots in Rome, and with the general breakdown of order, nobles in most Italian towns constructed massive defensive towers—often using stones that had once formed Rome’s majestic monuments.
- With justifiable pride, Gibbon concludes his final chapter by reviewing the themes and events he has explicated over thousands of pages. These include, he says, “many of the events most interesting in human annals”: the dictatorship of the Caesars, even while maintaining “the name and image of a free republic”; the effects of military despotism; the rise of Christianity; the founding of Constantinople; the division of

the Empire; the successive invasions by barbarians from Germany and central Asia; the codification of civil law; the rise of Islam; the temporal sovereignty of the popes; the attempt to recreate the Empire under Charlemagne; the Crusades; the fall of Byzantium; and the story of Rome during the Middle Ages.

Memory and Imagination

- The very last words of the *Decline and Fall* are a personal note:

It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work, which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life; and which, however inadequate to my own wishes, I finally deliver to the curiosity and candor of the public.

Gibbon's humility in this passage should not be overlooked. He knows that he has completed a masterpiece, but he also knows, better than any reader could, that it falls short of his own aspirations.

- Here's how Gibbon describes the episode on the Capitoline Hill in the *Memoirs* he was working on at the end of his life:

It was at Rome, on 15 October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.

- The friars were Franciscans—followers of Saint Francis—observing a life of great simplicity. Unlike Saint Francis, Gibbon had no sympathy for self-mortification and little sympathy for self-denial. In his opinion, this scene was a sad comedown from the greatness of the past.
- The church was the Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli. While it's true that the Temple of Jupiter had been there long before, it was an exaggeration to say that the friars were singing “in” it. The remains of the temple were completely buried by then.



Basilica of
Santa Maria in
Aracoeli

- It seems likely that Gibbon was describing in hindsight what ought to have occurred, rather than what actually did occur. He kept a detailed diary during his visit to Rome; it makes no mention of the incident on the Capitoline Hill. Gibbon was a man of strict veracity, not given to simply making things up. But it's very possible that his memory, normally so exact, relaxed in this instance and gave way to imagination.

Civilization and Progress

- Throughout the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon reveals his conviction not only that civilization had reached its highest point in the 18th century—a common Enlightenment belief—but that nowhere was this more evident than in Great Britain.

- After finishing his masterpiece, Gibbon was somewhat at a loss for a new project, but the habits of a lifetime made it necessary for him to find one. He considered editing a collection of early British historical texts—he even drafted a preface for it—the implication of which was that even if Rome declined and fell, Britain wouldn't have to. In the preface for the projected book, Gibbon declares:

We contemplate the gradual progress of society from the lowest ebb of primitive barbarism to the full tide of modern civilization. We contrast the naked Briton, who might have mistaken the sphere of Archimedes for a rational creature, to the contemporary of Newton, in whose school Archimedes himself would have been a humble disciple. And we compare the boats of osier and hides that floated along our coasts with the formidable navies which visit and command the remotest shores of the ocean. The English will be ranked among the few nations who have cultivated with equal success the arts of war, of learning, and of commerce. And Britain, perhaps, is the only powerful and wealthy state which has ever possessed the inestimable secret of uniting the benefits of order with the blessings of freedom.

- In the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon suggests complacently that the nations of Europe were too powerful ever to be invaded by barbarians, as the Roman Empire so often was. What he did not foresee was an eruption of violence from within. In a letter to an English friend, Gibbon lamented “the new barbarians, who labor to confound the order and happiness of society.”
- In France, the Terror of the French Revolution sent tens of thousands of aristocrats to the guillotine. In 1793, Gibbon wrote, “My contempt for the wild and mischievous system of democracy will not suffer me to believe that it can be adopted by any man of a sound understanding and historical experience.”



Suggested Reading

Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*.

Low, *Edward Gibbon*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does it matter if Gibbon “improved” the anecdote about his moment of inspiration on the Capitoline Hill?
2. How persuasive today are Gibbon’s assumptions about civilization and progress?



LECTURE 24

Decline and Fall in Modern Perspective

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* remains not only a great work of literature, but also a great work of history. During the past 50 years, however, developments in scholarship have greatly enriched the ways we think about the ancient world Gibbon described. This lecture examines a number of modern perspectives on the *Decline and Fall*, beginning with two important questions: Did the Roman Empire decline and fall? If so, why?

Decline or Transformation?

- Until the 1970s, the fact of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was basically taken for granted, though there was disagreement about the reasons for it. Then came a major trend of revisionism in which the very terms “decline” and “fall” were said to be misleading. It became usual for writers to include put-downs of Gibbon in their articles and books. More recently, however, there has been an energetic pushback that returns to the “decline and fall” scenario to some extent.
- Back when everyone agreed that the Roman Empire did decline and fall, many different explanations were given. Unsurprisingly, these explanations reflected larger cultural attitudes and national prejudices. Marxist historians, for example, said the Empire fell because it abused the proletariat. Other explanations were less polemical, but they concentrated, just as Gibbon had, on emperors, bureaucracies, and battles. They also tended to focus on what happened in big cities, even though most people in the Empire weren’t urban at all.
- The big change in historiography was launched by a brief and brilliant book, along with its sequels. That book was 1971’s *The World of Late Antiquity* by Peter Brown, who has taught in various universities in Britain and the United States.
- Brown’s approach has been to stress the emotional and spiritual experience of people in antiquity. From Brown and others who have carried forward his work, we have learned to make much better sense of the theological controversies that Gibbon was so perplexed by. We have come to understand why an ascetic could have achieved the status of a cultural hero. And we understand better that the Christendom that succeeded the Empire was impressively coherent in its own way.
- Revisionist historians have emphasized a very important point: We should be aware that the term “decline and fall” has assumptions

built into it. An empire is a vast and complicated structure. Over the centuries, it's bound to change. But change is not necessarily the same thing as "declining" for "falling" from a high level to a low one.

- One reason historians now use the term "late antiquity" is that it avoids thinking of the whole of ancient history as the problem of what went wrong with Rome. And a strong current of revisionism has explicitly rejected the whole idea of a "fall." What these historians see instead is mutation and transformation.
- In a way, transformation is Gibbon's theme, too. He makes it clear that successive waves of invaders really became immigrants. The Franks and Goths became French; the Vandals became Spanish. But some modern revisionists take an ideological stance that would not have appealed to him. They celebrate multiculturalism, they dislike technology and capitalism, and they may even doubt the value of literacy and rational thought. Gibbon never doubted that rationality is superior to irrationality. He thought that some cultures were simply better than others. And he held commerce and capitalism in high regard.
- Gibbon regarded himself as a member of the establishment, and he believed that civilization was a precious achievement. At times, this perspective distorts his interpretation of developments that we see differently now. But the story Gibbon tells is a truly compelling one, even for readers who may not share his cultural assumptions.
- Recently, there has been some pushback against the 1970s revisionist approach by scholars who insist that a lot really did break down from the 5th century onward. As one barbarian group after another burst out of central Asia, there was intolerable pressure on an overstretched Roman army to defend the borders of the Empire. According to these scholars, it's not true that nothing important was lost when the huge structure of the Empire finally fell apart. When the Empire was intact, it was multicultural already, but in a cooperative relationship that enhanced the quality of life everywhere.

- In material ways that were in the foreground of everybody's daily life, there was a drastic falling off after the troubles of the 5th century. Goods were no longer transported long distances. The money supply that nourished trade shrank startlingly, and money was replaced by barter. Houses were no longer built of stone and tiles, but of crude materials that soon rotted. Rome's population shrank from 1 million to 50,000. Politically, there was hardly any central authority. Feudal nobles followed a code of endless fighting, and life for everybody became more dangerous.
- Looking back at Gibbon in the context of these recent debates, it is clear that the end of the Empire was both a fall and a transformation. In some ways, it was fruitfully transformed. In other ways, it was disastrously wrecked.
- Gibbon has been much criticized for attributing the decline and fall of the Roman Empire to "the triumph of barbarism and religion." He used this phrase in a limited context, however, examining why the great buildings of Rome were so badly damaged. Moreover, Gibbon's



conclusion was that neither barbarism nor religion did as much damage as the greed of Roman builders for convenient materials.

- Nothing is more difficult than to explain historical causation. During the years when he was writing the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon increasingly emphasized multiple causes—even conflicting causes. He started out as a philosophic historian, confident that it was possible to identify crucial, underlying connections among events. By the time he was writing his final volumes, he had essentially stopped believing that.

Blind Spots

- Among the blind spots Gibbon exhibits in the *Decline and Fall*, three are especially important: Gibbon's attitude toward religion; his attitude toward Byzantine civilization; and his emphasis on individuals at the top of society, at the expense of the culture as a whole.
- Gibbon is well aware that religion played a major role in the history of the Mediterranean world. And he takes justifiable pride in his mastery of the intellectual issues that were debated so fiercely in a long series of councils and synods. But he never shows sympathy for the inner experience of people for whom religion was a crucial means of understanding their lives in a troubled time.
- On the Church as an institution—as opposed to a system of belief—Gibbon is surprisingly sympathetic. He appreciates the role the Church played in binding together people from every social class and every region of the ancient world. He also understands that bishops and their network of dioceses and parishes filled an essential role when the civil administration was disintegrating.
- When modern Byzantine specialists criticize Gibbon—and they all do—they're not really talking about the same things he is. It's not that Gibbon tells the story of Byzantium badly or that he tells it incorrectly. The complaint of modern historians is that Gibbon doesn't appreciate the extraordinary richness of Byzantine

civilization, which he regards as hopelessly static and passive. These historians emphasize the cultural and artistic achievements of the Byzantines, which Gibbon didn't know much about and might not have cared for if he had.

- Another of Gibbon's blind spots concerns the ancient economy. It's true that he was friends with Adam Smith, and he was very interested in the role of commerce in enhancing collective prosperity. He did, in fact, emphasize economic factors more than any previous historian had done. But a full understanding of the role of economics is something nobody in the 18th century could have achieved. Economics wasn't even a formal discipline yet. With respect to the ancient economy, we must simply be grateful for what later interpreters have taught us.

Rhythms of Culture

- Another kind of historical interpretation that has gained great power in modern times emphasizes a distinction between the history of events and the deep rhythms of culture that persist underneath all the day-to-day changes. One historian, Fernand Braudel, said, "The action of a few princes and rich men, the trivia of the past, bear little relation to the slow and powerful march of history. Those statesmen were, despite their illusions, more acted upon than actors."
- Gibbon does like to focus on great men. He says at one point, "In human life, the most important scenes will depend upon the character of a single actor." But the underlying theme of the *Decline and Fall* is the huge historical forces that even the greatest individual can only slightly influence. Moreover, Gibbon makes it abundantly clear that most men in high positions are not great, and that even those who are great are often frustrated and thwarted by forces beyond their control.
- Gibbon was not wrong to center his story on the achievements or failures of individuals. For him, and for the readers of his time, that's what history was. But we've learned since then to pay attention also to the private lives of ordinary people. Mary Beard lists some

fundamental questions that tend to get lost in accounts of politics and military campaigns: “How long did Romans expect to live? At what age did people get married? What rights did women have? Where did the money come from, to support the lavish lifestyles of the rich and privileged? And what about the slaves?”

- These are fascinating questions, and we expect historians today to address them. Gibbon addresses them only in passing; it would never have occurred to him to put them in the foreground. But he is, in fact, genuinely interested in such questions—in the legal status of women, in sources of income, and in the institution of slavery.
- Gibbon tells a truly epic story masterfully, and the *Decline and Fall* is compellingly readable throughout. Modern historians do modify or criticize some of his interpretations, but when we read their histories, we don't find many significant changes from the story that Gibbon told so well. One of our leading historians of the ancient world, Glen Bowersock, said, “Gibbon's achievement remains undiminished to this day.”

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*.

Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*.

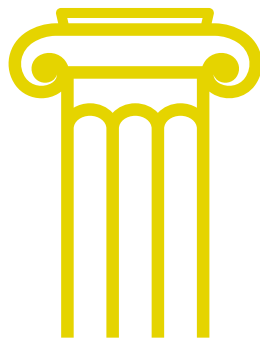
Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does it make sense to think of “decline and fall” and “transformation” as two aspects of the same historical process, rather than as mutually exclusive?
2. How significantly is Gibbon's narrative weakened by the limitations in his presentation of religious experience and of Byzantine civilization?
3. An often-heard criticism of Gibbon is that he fails to identify the causes for the decline of the Roman Empire, or that the causes that he does suggest are oversimplified. Is this criticism justified?



San Giovanni
Evangelista in
Parma, Italy



Bibliography

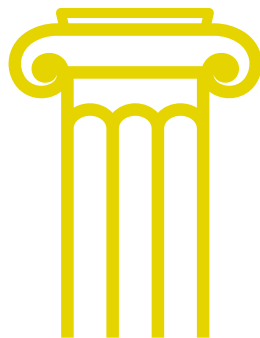
Editions

For many years the standard edition of the *Decline and Fall* was the one edited by J.B. Bury, published in seven volumes by Methuen between 1909 and 1914. Gibbon valued his footnotes greatly, not just for identifying sources but for adding interesting commentary, and Bury prints them at the foot of each page, which makes them easy to glance at as one reads along. Unfortunately, he adds many notes of his own, and it is not always easy to tell them apart from Gibbon's.

In 1994, David Womersley brought out a Penguin edition in three massive volumes, with the footnotes likewise at the bottom of each page, and this is now standard. Unfortunately, no available edition provides translations of Gibbon's quotations in Latin, Greek, and other languages.

Readers who may prefer to read in Kindle or iPad format should be warned that the complete *Decline and Fall* is not available in any reliable form. Womersley's one-volume Penguin abridgment can be downloaded, but not his complete three-volume edition. The many free e-book editions should be avoided, because they are carelessly scanned and riddled with errors and omissions. Gibbon was a great perfectionist and deserves better.

The standard edition of Gibbon's autobiography is *Memoirs of My Life*, assembled from his six manuscript drafts by Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson, 1966). This text was also used in a Penguin edition with the same title, edited by Betty Radice (1984, 2006) and available as an e-book. For those who might like to look at the original six drafts separately, they were published by John Murray in *Autobiographies* (London: Murray, 1896).



Biographies

Craddock, Patricia. *Young Edward Gibbon: Gentleman of Letters*. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1982. The standard biography, in conjunction with *Edward Gibbon: Luminous Historian*. Richly detailed but somewhat slow going. It takes up the *Decline and Fall* in detail.

———. *Edward Gibbon: Luminous Historian*. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1989. See above.

De Beer, Gavin. *Gibbon and His World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1968. Brief, engaging account, with excellent illustrations.

Low, D. M. *Edward Gibbon*. New York: Random House, 1937. Brisk and engaging, with many striking insights.

Young, G. M. *Gibbon*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1932. Concise and lively, the most readable introduction to Gibbon's life.

Books about Gibbon and the *Decline and Fall*

Burrow, J. W. *Gibbon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. A really excellent short introduction.

Carnochan, W. B. *Gibbon's Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. Imaginative attempt to relate Gibbon's character and experiences to his history.

Damrosch, Leo. *Fictions of Reality in the Age of Hume and Johnson*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. Places Gibbon in the context of other writers of imaginative nonfiction, and also of religious skepticism in his day.

Gossman, Lionel. *The Empire Unpossess'd: An Essay on Gibbon's Decline and Fall*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Psychological study, psychoanalytic in emphasis, with valuable insights into preoccupations that underlie the narrative.

Jordan, David P. *Gibbon and His Roman Empire*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971. Important pioneering overview of the intellectual context of the *Decline and Fall*. Still readable and enlightening.

Pocock, J. G. A. *Barbarism and Religion*. 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2016. An enormously learned six-volume study, a true magnum opus, covering the intellectual contexts of the first half of the *Decline and Fall* in impressive detail; full of brilliant interpretations, but daunting for nonspecialists.

Porter, Roy. *Edward Gibbon: Making History*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988. Like Burrow, an excellent introduction to the *Decline and Fall*. Though they naturally cover some of the same ground, both are well worth reading.

Womersley. *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. A major study of changes in emphasis and interpretation during the years Gibbon was writing successive volumes.

Ancient Histories

A number of Gibbon's sources are well worth reading in their own right, and they also provide a valuable perspective on the story he tells. These can be especially recommended (there are many available editions):

Ammianus Marcellinus. *Res Gestae*. Literally “deeds done,” the title is usually translated as *Roman History*. Much of this major work is lost, but the surviving part, which Gibbon follows with great respect, covers the later 4th century.

Athanasius. *The Life of Antony*. Pioneering and hugely influential saint's life, by a major theologian.

Procopius. *The Wars of Justinian* and *Secret History*. Important account of events in the 6th century by a Greek historian who lived through them, and also his scandalous tales of court life in Constantinople.

Tacitus. *Annals*, *Histories*, and *Germania*. The surviving masterpieces by Gibbon's favorite historian, covering the events of the first century A.D. Tacitus had served in the provinces, and his *Germania* is Gibbon's major source for “barbarian” culture.

Modern Histories

The volume and quality of modern work on the period covered by Gibbon are extraordinary, and what follows is only a very selective list. Any of these books will interest readers who would like to see how Gibbon's themes are treated in our own day and how perspectives are now emphasized that were only marginal in his interpretations.

Asbridge, Thomas. *The Crusades: The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land*. New York: Ecco, 2010. A detailed and engrossing account of 200 years of strife, including the establishment of European fiefdoms in the Near East and their final expulsion.

Beard, Mary. *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*. New York: Liveright, 2015. The ideal introduction to Roman history, from the earliest beginnings to the end of the 2nd century A.D., by a leading scholar with long experience at communicating with a general audience.

Bowersock, G. W. *Julian the Apostate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. Impressive demonstration of how much can be deduced from ambiguous sources.

Bowersock, G. W., Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds. *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Rich and wide-ranging collection of essays by experts. Large-scale discussions of such topics as “Barbarians and Ethnicity” and “War and Violence,” followed by nearly 500 pages of shorter discussions of important individuals and many other relevant topics (e.g., Agriculture, Iconoclasm, Martyrs, Ostrogoths, and Nudity).

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. A powerful and sympathetic account of the reasons why early Christianity was drawn to asceticism.

———. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Superb overview of the regions, formerly considered barbarous by the Romans, in which civilization evolved after the centralized Empire broke down.

———. *The World of Late Antiquity*. New York: Norton, 1971. Brief but powerful, the extraordinarily influential overview in which Brown inspired radically new approaches to the period.

Cameron, Averil. *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, A.D. 395–700*. London: Routledge, 2012. An authoritative and readable overview of current debates about ancient culture and its changes.

Fox, Robin Lane. *Pagans and Christians*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986. A massive, detailed, and very readable account of religious attitudes in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.

Grant, Michael. *The Climax of Rome*. London: Sphere Books, 1974. A readable and comprehensive overview, from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the death of Constantine, in a “History of Civilization” series.

Heather, Peter. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Combines a detailed account of social and economic conditions with vivid narration of migrations of peoples and military engagements.

Holland, Tom. *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012. A lively, well-researched account of the cultural milieu from which Islam emerged, and an overview of its later progress.

Neveux, François. *A Brief History of the Normans: The Conquests That Changed the Face of Europe*. Translated by Howard Curtis. London: Robinson, 2008. A good account of the Viking adventurers who settled permanently in Normandy, conquered England, and for a time governed Sicily and southern Italy.

Spivey, Nigel, and Michael Squire. *Panorama of the Classical World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. Big, superbly illustrated volume with concise essays on various topics (politics, the economy, education, etc.).

Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. A brief, well-illustrated, invigorating rebuttal of claims that the Empire gradually mutated rather than fell, making impressive use of recent archaeological evidence.

Wickham, Chris. *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. A monumental, massively detailed study of political and economic

development; the leading statement of the gradualist view that Heather and Ward-Perkins argue against.

Williams, Robert Louis. *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*. London: Routledge, 1985. Concise overview of this important historical moment.

Woolf, Greg, ed. *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Splendidly illustrated, with an emphasis on cultural history.

Historical Atlases

Cornell, Tim, and John Matthews. *The Cultural Atlas of the World: The Roman World*. Alexandria, VA: Stonehenge Press, 1991. An excellent resource in the Time-Life series, with plenty of illustrations as well as excellent maps.

Scarre, Chris. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*. London: Penguin, 1995. Similar in scope to the *Cultural Atlas*, more modest in size.

Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the East

Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. A truly magnificent interpretation of the great theologian's cultural context and intellectual development.

———. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. In-depth exploration of the social as well as psychological roots of asceticism, an invaluable perspective on a subject that Gibbon has great difficulty understanding.

Cameron, Averil. *Byzantine Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. A brisk overview of theories and controversies among Byzantine specialists, from the early 20th century to the present.

———. *The Byzantines*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. Not a formal history, but a well-informed account of Byzantine culture as it was experienced from inside.

———. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. A persuasive exploration of the language and symbols that gave Christianity its cultural centrality.

Dodds, E. R. *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*. New York: Norton, 1970. Classic study of the crisis of the 3rd century from a psychological point of view; concise and readable (originally given as lectures).

Findley, Carter Vaughn. *The Turks in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. The story of the pre-Islamic Turks, their conversion to Islam, and the empire of the Seljuks.

Herrin, Judith. *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Stresses the achievements of Byzantine culture, with only brief accounts of historical events.

———. *The Formation of Christendom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. Especially good on the gradual divergence of the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity.

Lamb, Harold. *Tamerlane: Conqueror of the Earth*. New York: Vintage, 1955. A gripping journey through the battles and conquests of Tamerlane.

MacMullen, Ramsay. *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. A judicious account of the myriad forms of pagan beliefs and practices against which Christianity had to make its way.

Markus, R. A. *The End of Ancient Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. A lucid account of changing attitudes after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire.

Runciman, Stephen. *The History of the Crusades*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951–1954. The classic account.

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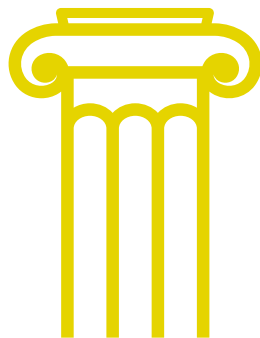


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